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**The Monster At the End of This Thesis**

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**The Monster At the End of This Thesis**

**by**

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**Thesis**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Fine Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**August 2020**

## **Dedication**

For Susan.

For Mom, Dad, and Alison.

For Tim and Lori Erickson.

## Acknowledgements

Endless thanks to the following wonderful folks who have made my time at UT Austin so rewarding. I hope I've been of some small help to them as well. Sincere apologies to anyone I forgot.

**My faculty/mentors:** Kirk Lynn, KJ Sanchez, Liz Engelman, Steven Dietz, Alex Shaw, Pat Shaw, Annie Baker, and Dr. Carra Martinez

**Other professors/mentors/visiting artists/collaborators/fellow students/  
reference-letter writers/givers of advice:** Liz Fisher, Kristin Perkins, Dr. Rebecca Rosen, Dr. Megan Alrutz, Robert Ramirez, Lara Dossett, Kathryn Dawson, Dr. Andrew Carlson, Dr. Charlotte Canning, Andy Grapko, Michelle Habeck, Bill Bloodgood, Quetta Carpenter, Rusty Cloyes, Lucien Douglas, Erica Gionfriddo, Sven Ortel, Dorothy O'Shea Overbey, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Deb Lewis, Cindy McCreery, Scott Shepherd, Lily Wolff, Adam Greenfield, Sarah Lunnie, Tim Sanford, Lizzie Stern, Gabe Greene, Jeff Gan, Eric Vera, Joey Harrington, Jesse Easdon, Tucker Goodman, Austin Shirley, Lina Chambers, Lauren Gomez, Rachel Heng, Kim Tran, Mason Rosenthal, Sam Karas, Ben Montero, Sarah Matthes, Isaac Burns, Sam Boyer, Maggie Calton, Khristián Méndez Aguirre, Davia Carter, Max Kaplow, Dan Kavanagh, Brittany Worthington, Jeremy Arnold, Emily Green, Millie Heckler, Faith Hillis, Will Kiley, Jessica Peña, Molly Roy, Shangyang Fang, Alexis Riley, Laura Baglereau, Michael Love, Siri Gurudev, kt shorb, Allison Shoemaker, George McConnell,

Aaron C. Thomas, Geoff Kershner, Megan Tabaque, Mary Laws, Caitlin Montanye Parrish, Chelsea Marcantel, Jessica Reese, Steven Wilson, Cara Phipps, Margaret Jumonville, Greg Romero, Katie Bender, Elizabeth Williamson, Takeshi Kata, Halena Kays, Allison Gregory, Jenny Connell Davis, Jenny Lavery, Natalie Garcia, Carlo Garcia, David Jarrott, Jake Brinks, David De La Barcena, Manuela Guerra Fletcher, Stephanie Salama, Amanda Dunne Acevedo, Lindsey Barlag Thornton, McKenzie Gerber, Maria Striar, and Suzan Zeder

**Designers/assistant directors/stage managers/production teams/**

**administrators who enriched my work with their time and talent:** Skyler Taten, Emily Garcia, Courtney Thomas, Carolyn Cullen, Lowell Bartholomee, Delena Bradley, Sara D. Chaney, Jeff Grapko, Libby Jantz, Adam Miller-Batteau, Adam Noble, Lindsey Thurston, David Tolin, Taylor Travis, Ariane Stier, Avery Valdés, Elise Peterson, Helen Hetrick, Alexis Williams, Callie Blackstock, Zoe Andersen, Scott Bussey, Laura Epperson, Stephanie Fisher, Isaac Iskra, Sarah Jack, Qi Jiajing, Sam Lipman, Malysa Quiles, Jessi Rose, Mingxiang Ya, Chris Conard, Robert Mallin, Aundre Wesley, Clarissa Smith-Hernandez, Nathan Harper, Ryan Prendergast, Jess Champion, Averil Houston, Lizeth Salinas, Patricia Semenov, Liliana Zapatero, and Kriston Woodreaux

**Actors who did the same:** Kareem Badr, Tanner Hudson, Cat Palacios, Zac Thomas, Michael Williams, Judd Farris, Gwenny Govea, Robert Matney, Grayson Pennington, Amber Quick, Ryan Alvarado, Caroline Beagles, Will Kachi, Devin Ramirez, Eleanor Webster, Hannah Hopkins, Alex Armbruster, Jayla Ball, Sahil

Bhutani, Grace Bohn, Kialond Bronson-Smith, Shane Colwell, Kyle Cordova, Rebecca East, Anapaula Guajardo, Kathy Guerrero, Shannon Homan, Brooks Laney, Morgan Riddle, Paola Montserrat Santibanez, Christian Scheller, Carlie Schoultz, Tori Schulze, Khali Sykes, Azari Sumbler, Juleeane Villareal, Sam Kerner, Miles Agee, Brisa Shaw, Darlesia Carter, Andrew Rodriguez, Michael Galvan, Kennedy Thompson, Tiffany Michelle Thomas, and Nora Ulrey

**Everyone in my Playwriting I class, all of whom fulfilled the old cliché of the student learning more from the teacher than the teacher does from the student:** Amaya Coleman, Damian Gomez, Will Hahn, Amanda Hart, Maddie Martinez, Erick Mendoza, Brooke Reaves, Jamie Rule, Roberto Soto, Scotty Villhard, Augustus Wheeler, Marion Gayraud, Aamer Husain, Madison Johnson, Emily Koller, Eddie Lambert, Austin Lynch, Tom Mattia, Victoria Nguyen, Jane Palacios, Emily Peterson, Jabin Rodriguez, and Nick Saldviar

**Finally, my Cohort—past, present, future, and forever:** I.B. Hopkins, Paul Kruse, Cecelia Raker Ehrenfeld, Danny Tejera, Minghao Tu, Jess Shoemaker, Lane Michael Stanley, Lena Barnard, Renae Jarrett, Nick Kaidoo, Gursimrat Kaur, Hee-won Kim, Sam Mayer, Jenny Morris Krick, Anna Skidis Vargas, Jaymes Sanchez, Josiah Turner, Andrea Hart, Mike Steele, I-Chia Chiu, Hannah Kenah, Daria Miyeko Marinelli, Thom May, Adam Sussman, Paz Pardo, Drew Paryzer, Travis Tate, Graham Schmidt, and Hannah Wolf

## **Abstract**

### **The Monster at the End of This Thesis**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2020

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I've always written about monsters in my plays, and that hasn't changed in grad school. But for the first time in my 20 or so years as a playwright, I've started to interrogate *why* I write about them, and how I can change my tactics within the medium to explore different sociopolitical themes and ideas, as well as my own life and humanity. Even though monsters have always been used by writers for greater thematic implications/messaging about society, I've only recently come around to embracing it in my own work. My thesis will trace this journey, with special attention paid to how I've begun pivoting monsters from being external plot devices to reflections of what's monstrous in our own, very human world.

This document will be broken up into seven chapters chronicling my relationship with monsters in my work, from my early playwriting days until now. Each chapter is named after a specific monster that corresponds with the subject matter. For example, the chapter where I revisit my gestative monster plays is titled CHESTBURSTERS—a reference to the film *Alien*. When we get to my play about the first documented shark attacks in the United States, we're in THE SHARK FROM JAWS.



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## 1. CHESTBURSTERS

As a kid raised by his dad on a steady diet of horror movies, I grew up believing that monsters had a singular purpose: to scare. Literally—never metaphorically.

In high school, I remember seeing an interview with *Alien* screenwriter Dan O'Bannon where he described wanting to sexually attack the men in the audience by presenting a nightmare version of pregnancy. In the film, several characters stumble across a chamber filled with mysterious eggs on a remote planet. When one of the eggs opens, a parasitic, spider-like creature springs out and latches onto the face of a man named Kane, implanting an alien species into his stomach that soon violently bursts from his chest. When the British Board of Film Classification rated *Alien*, they slapped it with a dreaded “X” for “a perverse view of sexual function.”

But I didn't need any highfalutin talk of sexual inversion for *Alien* to scare me. The creature's physical traits—slimy exoskeleton, acid blood, and extra set of pharyngeal jaws—were scary enough on their own. What did I care about subversion?

I had a similar experience with *Nightbreed*, the earliest horror movie I remember seeing in full, and a film that, ironically, is *obsessed* with the subversion of traditional monsters. Hatched from the mind of Clive Barker, it centers on a troubled man named Boone, who gets gaslit by his psychiatrist into thinking that he's a serial killer (in reality, it's the doctor who's the murderer). Convinced he's evil, Boone retreats to a subterranean community known as Midian, but it soon becomes apparent that the supernatural entities who dwell there—horns, fangs, quills, and tentacles abound—are merely a tribe of outcasts nearly driven to extinction. In the film's final battle, it's the humans who are the real monsters.

But I never gave much thought to who was good or bad. The monsters were cool, full stop. *Nightbreed* had a very specific message about human beings, and yet I only had time for aesthetic terror, not theme. I clung to this perception well into adulthood, even as I was introduced to concrete texts and interviews such as the one with O'Bannon that affirmed how writers would intentionally use monsters as a means of social commentary and/or further exploring humanity. It wasn't that I didn't know a monster could be more than just a scare tactic. I just didn't find it to be all that effective or interesting. I viewed horror as a genre that was best when it operated on mechanics alone.

When I look back on why I felt this way into my 20s and early 30s, I think it had something to do with my own sociopolitical leanings. While I've always identified as liberal, there was a long stretch of my adult life where I wanted to be apolitical—and thus somewhat anti-intellectual—in both my art-making and art consumption. Today, I wonder if my past refusal to recognize the inherent politics in other artists' writing and my own came from a place of privilege. I didn't see the point of sociopolitical commentary in art—especially horror, my favorite genre—because I didn't see the point of it in my own life. And I didn't see the point of it in my own life because, as a cisgender, heterosexual, white man, my life was, in comparison to a lot of other people's, pretty good.

I say that not from a place of guilt or self-flagellation, but clinical observation. I never found myself specifically targeted by the laws, policies, decisions, and institutionalized imbalance that marginalized so many others. I never found myself in the position of the monsters in *Nightbreed*. So I didn't see a benefit in offering a point of view—not just about politics, but about humans in general. However, when revisiting an early play of mine, I suspect that, deep down, I probably knew better.

I wrote *Little Triggers* in 2011 and saw it produced in 2012 by a beloved, since-shuttered Chicago theatre company I was affiliated with called The Ruckus. The main character of the play is Martin, a young and disgruntled administrative assistant who has to stay late at work on Christmas Eve. Throughout the night, he encounters several office-related terrors, including an ominous printer repairman, a giant vulture Muppet in a business suit, and two serpents made out of shredded paper.

Make no mistake—that description makes the play sound more interesting than it actually is. While I have nothing but fond memories of working on *Little Triggers* and completely stand by it as a production, the writing leaned too heavily on the spectacle found in its monsters and little else. Theatre critic Justin Hayford summed up this problem rather accurately in his review of *Little Triggers* for the *Chicago Reader*:

“Director Allison Shoemaker quotes the preface to *A Christmas Carol* in the program, inviting a comparison both inevitable and unfortunate. For while Dickens’ novella is as coherent as it is hallucinogenic, Daniel Caffrey’s play is frustratingly unfocused. It’s never clear why Martin needs the visitations, exactly what the visitors are offering, or why the experience unlocks Martin’s dormant artistic side—which, in this production by The Ruckus, makes for two hours of imaginative impenetrability.”

I don’t believe in playwrights (or any artist) seeking validation in press reviews. But I *do* believe in pulling what’s useful from feedback, no matter if that feedback is coming from a peer, mentor, reader, audience member, or yes, even a critic. Did Hayford’s review bother me at the time? Of course it did. But in retrospect, he was

completely right. When I think back to writing *Little Triggers*, I received plenty of notes from mentors, peers, actors, and designers on how I needed to clarify the human protagonist's journey. I needed to be as invested in his arc as I was the play's more spectacular elements.

But I brushed off those criticisms, which led to me not interrogating Martin's journey as thoroughly as I could have. I viewed the play's use of monsters as a virtue in of itself. I never stopped to think that these forces may be scarier if they were tied to a deeper meaning or a more centralized human story. What's funny is that Martin was totally based on me—on the frustrations I experienced while juggling both an office day job and an after-hours theatre career. I actually had a *lot* to say about the chaotic work-life balance experienced by so many artists living in big cities post-college. But because Martin didn't have some externally spectacular characteristic—a beak, claws, or scaly tail—I didn't find him all that interesting, even though he was the protagonist of the play. I was also deeply insecure toward the prospect of writing about myself, even though I *was* writing about myself. If I wrote the play now—or even rewrote it, which I might still—I'd enter the process knowing that Martin's (and my own) internal struggle to be accepted creatively, romantically, and professionally is just as compelling and terrifying as the vulture Muppet or the paper serpents. It's also more universal to the audience.

Today, I view *Little Triggers* as a half-measure. It wasn't that I was refusing to say anything at all with my work. I was refusing to *admit* that I was, resulting in a script that was afraid to fully commit to its own ideas. That summer, I would begin work on the story where I first realized that I had something to say, even if it took several more years (and a move to Texas) to fully accept that realization.

## 2. THE SHARK FROM JAWS

“What if Susan played the shark?” asked my friend Allison Shoemaker.

This was in June of 2012, and after working together on *Little Triggers*, we were in the early stages of developing a script I’d always wanted to write about the Jersey Shore Shark Attacks of 1916. The play would eventually be called *Matawan*, although neither of us knew that yet.

I tried to be polite in my response. After all, Allison was and still is a dear friend and collaborator; a director whose work I respect. A director who’s usually right about most things theatre-related.

Still, my breath tightened and my face scrunched up. I explained that I never envisioned the shark as a character, but more akin to the shark from *Jaws*: a soulless animal that we wouldn’t see until the final attack of the play. I described a vision of floor-to-ceiling green lighting gel being spread across the entire stage, giving the audience the illusion that they were underwater with the shark’s final victim. Through the gel, we would finally see the monster in full via some kind of projection or giant puppet head.

Allison told me we could try that out in time. But for the moment, she wanted me to go home and write a shark monologue for Susan—my then-girlfriend/now-wife, and the only actor in our development workshop who didn’t yet have a role. I begrudgingly agreed. I hated it. But I agreed.

When I sat down to write that night, I was at a loss. How would a great white shark sound if it could talk? For inspiration, I read the opening chapter of one of my favorite novels, *Grendel* by John Gardner. In the book, Gardner tells the story of *Beowulf*,

as well as the events that took place before the epic poem, from the point of view of its monstrous antagonist.

I've always been drawn to the way Gardner depicts Grendel as philosophical, lonely, and even wise, all while never downplaying his ruthlessness and violent behavior toward humans and other animals. The prose of Grendel's inner monologue is both sparse and eloquent; blunt and poetic; lucid and off-putting. It somehow captures the most visceral parts of nature and the florid linguistics of humanity. I tried to deliver a similar economical poetry with the shark—dialogue that was simultaneously ethereal and muscular. And like Gardner, I decided to start my play early on in the shark's life. I wrote a monologue where a shark described its own birth.

To this day, that opening speech remains in the script, mostly unchanged.

Now seems like a good time to clarify that I rarely, if ever, know what any of my plays are going to be “about” when I start writing them. I usually know the story, but it's only after a first draft (and sometimes later) that I know what I'm trying to say with it. Even in my late-in-life willingness to ground my writing more firmly in humanity, that hasn't changed. I'm sure there are playwrights who begin from a place of theme or commentary, but I usually start with plot, image, or character.

So my journey toward the current version of *Matawan* was a slow one, starting in that 2012 workshop and concluding (for now) in my second year of grad school. Across an extended workshop and three different productions (the most recent being in the 2018/2019 Subscription Series season at UT), I continued to build upon the *Grendel* emulation for my play's main character. The shark became less and less of what we think of as a shark. She became less and less of what we think of as a traditional monster. The evolution of her character and the greater themes of the play went something like this:

**Workshop at Red Tape Theatre (summer 2012):** Given the compressed timeframe of the initial workshop (Red Tape gave us about three weeks to rehearse, then present something to the public), we focused more on how the shark moved and spoke rather than what it all meant from a thematic standpoint. There were no costumes or visual design elements, but we did land on some choreography for the attacks that would come into play for the world premiere. Namely, we created the water by having all of the human characters bob on their feet and walk in a frontward-backward pattern. A human ocean.

**World premiere with *The Ruckus* (summer 2015):** While the first full production required Susan to go deeper with the shark than she had in the workshop, the characterization remained the same: clipped dialogue spoken in a fluid rhythm, smooth body movement that would snap into something more savage and staccato during an attack sequence, and high-alert neck gestures, similar to how a shark would jolt its head and snout when prey is in the vicinity.

For the first time, we also had to think about makeup and costuming. In this early iteration, we wanted to give Susan the freedom to move while also making her look as shark-like as possible. She had permanently wet and slicked-back hair, wore a gray wetsuit, and smeared a band of black paint across her face to mimic the “doll’s eyes” of a giant fish.

Another first was an increased emphasis on what I was actually trying to say with the play, although it would feel like dabbling compared to scripts I would write in the next few years. I attribute this to two obvious but nonetheless useful factors: First off, the workshop was mostly about writing the script. We really only had a couple of days to get



it on its feet for a paying audience, so out of sheer practicality, we didn't have time to focus too much on depth or meaning. With the full production, however, we went into rehearsals with actual text that we had plenty of time to refine and analyze. We embarked on a week of table work because, well, that's what you do.

Second, we had to write a press release. And since I was a part of the company, I was tasked with doing it. It's funny to think how something that, at the time, seemed like such a tedious chore proved to be essential in the writing process. I think every playwright should have to write a press release for the world premiere of their script, regardless of whether or not they're a part of the producing company. It forces them to identify the patterns in their story, which in turn forces them to think about the themes. Here's what I came up with for *Matawan*:

“In the summer of 1916, a series of freakish and fatal shark attacks paralyzed the Jersey Shore. Further inland, a polio outbreak plagued Philadelphia, while the cloud of World War I loomed over the entire nation. As the forces of nature, disease, and war close in, people struggling to adapt must face a monster whose evolution has led to millions of years of survival—a monster who now faces some terrors of her own. Spanning several cities and the infinite depths of the ocean, *Matawan* conjures an unusual moment in American history, and examines how our internal anxieties are often just as terrifying as our national catastrophes.”

When rereading that first rehearsal draft of the script, I'm not sure how much all of that was immediately clear on the page. But in 2013, I was at least able to pinpoint the seeds that would eventually bloom into underwater plants, which aided in the revision

process. For example, I realized that three of the four shark-attack victims in the play were outsiders. One victim wasn't traditionally masculine enough. Another was a shunned epileptic boy and the final person was a closeted gay man. But what about the fourth? In that early draft, he was a virile bell captain at a luxury hotel in central New Jersey. But after identifying the outsider pattern, I decided to lean into his foreign identity (in real life, he was a Swiss-German immigrant), making him the target of other characters' xenophobia. In the final draft of the script, all of the shark's victims were driven to the water because they were outcasts trying to prove their worth to others.

So while I didn't set out to write about otherness and ostracism, it turned out I was doing so anyway, and I was doing so through the play's monster. Only when I sat down and succinctly summed up what my writing was about for a press blurb did I start to see all of the connections. That's why the press release for the 2018 UT Austin production of *Matawan* looked very similar to that very first one. The world premiere's press release was aspirational and the UT press release was a prophecy realized.

**Production at UT Austin, Department of Theatre and Dance (fall 2018):** By the time UT produced *Matawan* three years after the world premiere, the experience of applying to grad school, much like having to write a press release, had asked me to look at my work a little more closely, especially in the Statement of Purpose. In the first paragraph, I wrote a sentence that captures this very thesis that I'm writing now:

"I love using [monsters] to explore the vulnerability within us human beings. When someone gets confronted by a force so much bigger and different than ourselves, it can upend their way of life."

I agree with that declaration and view it as a north star in my work. At the same time, I wasn't truly practicing it in my writing when I applied to UT in winter of 2016. I didn't have any kind of well-honed critical eye. I wasn't viewing my earlier plays as half-measures or thinking about how I could explore the human-monster relationship in greater detail. That would begin to change after I actually began grad school, especially with the next production of *Matawan*.

At UT, director Lane Stanley and dramaturg Kristin Perkins pointed out a bigger connection between the shark and the humans in the script. Where as the humans keep secrets and refuse to acknowledge what they want in life, the shark *only* knows how to go after what she wants. She only knows how to live in the moment. She only knows how to acknowledge her own fear rather than keep it secret, which renders her somewhat fearless.

Lane articulated this study in contrasts to the design team, who highlighted it in the visual and aural elements of the show. Set Designer Zoe Andersen kept the humans boxed in on small wooden docks while the shark was able to wander freely on the floor below. Similarly, Costume Designer Stephanie Fisher clad the shark in a gown and bathing cap reminiscent of a 1920s flapper—a generational subculture that, in the play's world of 1916, hadn't emerged just yet. This cast the shark in a slightly futuristic, evolved light. In a way, she was more accepting of her own inherent humanity and progress than the humans were of their own.

With the UT production, it dawned on me that I envied the shark for these very reasons. Five months before, my grandfather on my dad's side died. Coincidentally, he and my grandmother lived on the very island in New Jersey where the shark claimed its first victim. In the wake of my grandfather's passing, we found out that one of my dad's

three brothers, Scott, had a son he never knew about. While the majority of us were excited to bring this new family member into the fold in time for my grandfather's memorial, my uncle wasn't. He was worried how meeting his progeny, now in his 30s, would affect his relationship with his fiancée and her kids. He felt embarrassed. He felt guilty. He was still having a hard time processing the death of his own father, so much that he couldn't comprehend being one himself. His feelings caused a huge rift in the family, especially with my dad, who believed that my uncle needed to be more available to his son. Up to that point, they had always been extremely close as brothers, having bonded over their love of science-fiction and horror movies. Now, they hadn't spoken a word to each other in almost half a year. The silence would go on all the way until the following June.

To be frank, I was an emotional wreck during all of this. As 2018 unfolded, I felt like my extended family, who had always seemed to get along, was falling apart. I realized that my uncle and several of the other men in my family had secrets they didn't want the world to know about. I realized that they were all having an incredibly hard time dealing with my grandfather's passing, and rather than openly express their vulnerability, they poured it into drinking and substance abuse, shouting matches, squabbling, and worst of all, silence. Eventually, I realized I was caught up in this cycle of hyper-masculine repression as well. My therapist and I talked a lot about how my immediate family addressed difficult topics in my household growing up, determining that, while there was always transparency around information, we often rushed through the process of emotional healing, all in the name of strength and toughness.

For example, my dad has struggled with chronic depression and suicidal ideations his entire life. It got so bad that when I was 17, he admitted himself into a mental

institution for electroconvulsive therapy. While the therapy was successful and set him on a new path of dealing with his mental illness, my mom, sister, and I were all in such a rush for him to get healthy that we viewed it as a magic bullet, never taking the time to talk about *our* emotional fallout from his institutionalization until almost 20 years later. There was informational clarity, but emotional repression.

I think this came from the way my dad was raised. Growing up in working-class New Jersey with three brothers, there wasn't a lot of room or permission for them to be vulnerable—to grieve or cry or vocalize their insecurities. I don't want to give the impression that they didn't have wonderful, loving parents or that *I* don't have wonderful, loving parents. But I think we could all stand to examine our emotional honesty. I unknowingly poured all of this into *Matawan*'s shark-attack victims and their own families. Many of the human characters fear the shark, and to be fair, many of them do get killed by her. But they could also learn a lot from her if they were able to hear her words the same way the audience does.

This new lens on the play resulted in some minor script changes at UT, though not a ton aside from some adjusted lines and a scrapped epilogue for pacing reasons. But Lane and the design team's aesthetic juxtaposition between the above- and below-water worlds did help me see systems in my play that I hadn't realized were there, systems that relied on how the human and non-human characters of the play informed one another. It got me equally excited about exploring both humans and monsters in my future plays. Additionally, the production taught me the important lesson that re-contextualization doesn't always come from huge edits or revisions. The simple act of talking about *Matawan* with a brand-new group of artists helped me connect the play to my own life,

which in turn reframed how I think about humans and monsters in the grander scheme of my work as a whole.

My faculty also had a hand in steering me toward this more complicated and visible intersection. In fall of 2017, during my first End-of-Semester chat, Steven Dietz good-naturedly challenged me with a question regarding *Matawan*, which had just gotten selected for production at UT the following year: “Why do you hate humans so much?” he asked. “You put them in your play for a reason.” I thought this over and told him (and myself) that maybe I didn’t. He then asked me if I viewed myself as a political writer.

“No, not really,” I responded. I told Dietz and the rest of my professors that I tended to view overtly political theatre as self-congratulatory; a method of applauding the audience for having an opinion they already had when they entered the lobby. I told Dietz that I thought it was presumptuous for a playwright to think they could change someone’s mind simply by writing a script and getting it produced. This was a well-rehearsed line; I had been regurgitating it ever since I began writing plays.

Dietz clarified that he defined a political writer merely as someone with something to say. Someone with a point of view. Which is to say, most playwrights. I couldn’t argue or even disagree with him. How could I? I had already begun further exploring *Matawan* with Lane and Kristin, and we had discovered that it *wasn’t* just a play about a shark. It was play about what a shark had to say about humans. But once again, that realization was retroactive. I still hadn’t written a script where I kept humans front-of-mind from the very beginning. That would change just one semester later.

### 3. GREMLINS

In spring 2018, Liz Engelman asked us to bring three different play ideas to the first day of her Playwrights' Gym course. These had to be scripts we had always wanted to write, but had never gotten around to, for whatever reason. Of my three ideas, one involved a giant serpent (more on that later), another centered around a de-extincted woolly mammoth, and the other featured no monsters at all. Liz asked me to write the third one. I was admittedly a little disappointed. I already had an outline in place for the serpent play, and I had been itching to actually get the mammoth play off the ground after several false starts. Still, it was only my second semester of grad school and I've always been a people pleaser, sometimes to my detriment. I agreed to write the play with no monsters. I've never confirmed it with Liz, but I suspect that she knew exactly what she was doing. I suspect that she knew writing a script without a non-human antagonist to lean on would be healthy for me as a playwright. Turns out she was right.

The play, eventually titled *Sow and Suckling*, is a sequel to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, following the boys 30 years after they get off the island. In the time between the novel and the play, primary antagonist Jack Merridew convinced all of the surviving characters to make a pact that they wouldn't tell anyone about the murders and other savage behavior they committed while marooned. This created a sort of collective amnesia, the boys repressing their violent memories until they forgot about them.

When the lights come up, we're with the family of Roger, the most savage and sociopathic character from the novel, on Christmas Eve. In the spirit of dark holiday films such as *Gremlins*, the evening starts off festive, leaning on familiar holiday tropes and imagery that soon give way to darkness overtaking the household. When Roger's wife

Doreen makes a roast pig for dinner—wild pigs being a prominent symbol from the novel—all of his violent memories come rushing back, sending him into a downward spiral of guilt and hysteria. It's up to Jack to shove Roger's memories back into his subconscious, which of course has severe repercussions.

I cranked out a first draft pretty quickly in Gym, with the front half of the play—its fundamentals, anyway—more or less surviving all the way until the first production as part of UTNT in my final year of grad school. The second half of the play, however, has gone through a number of drafts and changes. In the beginning, I was fascinated by the novel's protagonist Ralph, the most civilized boy in the book, growing up to be a disturbed and feral adult due to his experiences on the island. Conversely, Roger would age into adulthood rather uneventfully with what he thinks to be a conventional, nuclear British family. This inversion came to me after seeing a production of *Lord of the Flies* at Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, directed by UT alumnus Halena Kays.

Even though I had read the book several times by that point in my life, Halena's version was the first time I didn't view the characters in the novel as black and white. Ralph and his friend Piggy were no longer simply the "good guys" and Jack and Roger were no longer simply the "bad guys." Instead, Halena and the cast honored the nuances of Golding's original text by exploring the positive and negative consequences of *both* factions of boys. In the novel, Ralph, in his attempts to downplay every savage aspect of himself, ends up being an ineffective leader. While it's not healthy for a society to be 100 percent savage, it's not healthy for it to be 100 percent civilized, either.

I tried capturing this by making Ralph the center of the second half of *Sow and Suckling*. In the first draft, he broke into Roger's household, forced him to remember their shared past, then killed him out of revenge. Act Two brought him to the home of



Jack, with Roger's severed head looming in the background on a pike. The action stayed largely talky, little more than a debate about nature versus nurture. Here's a sample:

**RALPH**

Yes. Yes, I have had what one might call a...

**JACK**

A hard life.

**RALPH**

Yes.

**JACK**

And that's exactly why I acted upon certain impulses—not all of them, mind you; not even the tip of the iceberg—when we were on the island. It's also why I stopped acting on them as soon as we left. For I knew it would cause me trouble. Maybe that was the same for Roger. And Maurice. And whoever else.

**RALPH**

Yes! That's what I'm getting at.

## **JACK**

Then again, maybe it wasn't. We'll never know, will we? Maybe they were just acting out for no good reason at all. Boys will be boys and all that. How does that make you feel? That perhaps some of us are horrible and some of us...aren't.

And so on. Was it interesting? Not really. It was so back and forth. So expositional. So inactive, with little to no momentum. Even worse, I was relying on one of my oldest tricks: using the horror-movie imagery of a severed head to visually make up for the lack of substance in the dialogue. After hearing these pages out loud in class, I knew the second half of the play didn't work. But, in feeling so beholden to my original concept of the reversal of savagery and honing in on Ralph, I felt stuck as to where I should go next in the revising/rewriting process.

Thankfully, I received a second wind after my Gym partner, Minghao Tu, offered the suggestion of fitting my play into an actionable statement. Noun, verb, noun. I came up with "Repression leads to savagery," which clicked things into place for me and moved me to write a brand-new second half the night before my final share at the end of the semester. The process was one of reverse-engineering. When I applied my mantra to the first draft, I realized that the biggest problem was that the script peaked too early. The story's most savage act—Roger getting murdered—took place halfway through. Where was everything supposed to go from there? My mantra was "Repression leads to savagery," not "Repression leads to savagery leads to (fill in the blank)."

I knew that for my second draft, Roger's murder would have to take place at the end of the play—maybe even after the final blackout. Between the pig-throw and that last moment, I had to find other, more character-driven ways to ramp up to this conclusive act

of savagery (the kids puppeteering the pig head, consumption of alcohol, awkwardly timed nudity, etc.). That's not to say I completely did away with the entire original second half of the play. Rather, I stripped it for parts, taking the most essential lines from Ralph and Jack's moral debate and reassigning them to a similar—and much shorter—version conversation between Jack and Roger. Ralph still appears, but not until the final moments of the play as a final button to drive home the messaging.

Even through several more drafts leading up to *Sow and Suckling's* UTNT production, I've continued to cling to those four simple words of "Repression leads to savagery," which have of course branched out to more specific sub-themes involving British conservatism, patriarchal dominance, gender inequality, etc. But at the end of the day, the play's thesis is that, by choosing to forget the horrible acts they committed on the island, the boys from *Lord of the Flies* have only become more horrible inside. At a certain point, there's no way to keep this darker side of their personalities hidden. The more they try to deny the beast within themselves, the more that beast comes out, sabotaging Christmas and bringing Roger and Jack straight back to the place they were stranded on as children. Even when they think they've buttoned their past misdeeds back up and restored order, their savagery has infected their family by the end of the play, ensuring that no one gets away unscathed.

In my pre-rehearsal meetings with director Liz Fisher, I explained my mantra of the play, upon which she helped establish additional language to aid in both designer choices and revisions. She described Jack, a British police officer in the script, as a keeper of law and order who believes Roger has to indulge his inner monster so they can both put it back in the box. Not only did her terminology align with my interests (and this thesis)—it became a guidepost for what we've since called the climax of the play. When

Roger realizes the grown-up Ralph is loose in the city and targeting his family, he wants to leave the house and hunt him down. The only way Jack gets him to stay is by playing the role of Ralph himself and allowing Roger to act out a ritualistic mock killing.

We landed on the role-play idea while talking about how acts of violence can physiologically affect the perpetrator later in life. This made me think of Joshua Oppenheimer and Christine Cynn’s documentary *The Act of Killing*, where the directors ask two Indonesian gangsters to non-lethally re-stage the hundreds of murders they took part in during the Indonesian genocide of 1965–66. For much of the film, they treat their crimes surreally—almost whimsically—as they filter them through popular Hollywood genres such as the Western and the musical.

Only in the final scene, when one of the men is asked to take on the role of the victim, does he express remorse. His body physically rebels against his conscience, resulting in sobbing, flatulence, and vomiting. When I described this scene to Liz, she pointed out how it sounded like a horror movie in itself, even though *The Act of Killing* is a documentary. This opened me up to thinking about the horror in *Sow and Suckling*, particularly during the climax, from a standpoint of human psychology, rather than non-human monsters and spectacle.

It also made me think of my second End-of-Semester chat a few months earlier, in the spring of 2018. KJ Sanchez pointed out that, regardless of their species, the characters in *Sow and Suckling* are still very much monsters. That they’re human makes them even *more* monstrous. My colleague Anna Skidis Vargas reinforced this one semester later during one of our Colloquiums. We were assigned to write “teasers” for each other as playwrights and directors—one-sentence soundbites that summed up each of our work. She had a simple one for me: “My name is Dan Caffrey, and I write about monsters and

the monsters within.” Blunt, accurate, and effective. Most importantly, it widened the types of creatures I write about. It freed me up to put more tools in my toolbox.

Fittingly enough, the teaser also calls back to *Nightbreed*. Where I once paid little mind to the film’s message of humans being the real monsters, here I was embracing it in my own work. A huge part of grad school for me has been learning how to state the obvious and speak with clarity. Just because *Sow and Suckling* required me to start thinking more deeply about theme didn’t mean that theme had to be dressed in pseudo-intellectual word salad. Statements like “repression leads to savagery” and “I write about monsters and the monsters within” have shown me that depth and simplicity aren’t mutually exclusive. They can—and often should—coexist.

Even though I want to make a few more revisions to the script, the UT production of *Sow and Suckling* was everything I could have dreamed. In Liz Fisher, I was lucky to have a director who never shied away from the more transgressive, horrific aspects of the show, all while prompting me to answer how all of the blood, grease, and sex connected to the human-centric horror of psychology, repression, and trauma. And in Liz Engelman, I had a dramaturg who always steered me back to my mantra about repression leading to savagery. In the end, accepting that humans can be just as interesting and frightening (even more so) than my beloved traditional monsters resulted in what I believe to be one of my best plays—one that had beloved horror-movie tropes such as a demented Santa Claus and a man in a pig mask, but also had traceable arcs for all of the characters.

Now that I had experienced a minor breakthrough—a play with all humans!—I knew that at some point, I’d want to reintroduce non-human characters to my work. I knew I’d want to see if I could find an effective balance between the two different kinds

of monsters. But before that, I would take a detour and focus on a play that didn't have any monsters in it at all—human or otherwise.

#### 4. DARTH VADER

In fall of 2018—the semester after I wrote the first and second drafts of *Sow and Suckling*—KJ gave us a prompt similar to Liz’s. We had to bring in three ideas for a play, but because the class was Documentary Theatre, the plays had to be explorations of something happening in real life. I honestly can’t remember any of my play ideas outside of the one I ended up writing, which was about my new cousin. We had gotten closer after I flew up to New Jersey for a visit and he flew to Austin to see the UT production of *Matawan*.

When I started the script, I thought I wanted to focus on the experience of being adopted. When talking to my cousin (coincidentally named Scott, just like my uncle), he described being taken from one’s biological mother and given to another family as traumatic, even if it meant the baby went to a loving and supportive home like he did. He had always felt like an outsider in his family, despite never wanting for affection or resources. Drawn to this idea of adoption as trauma (completely new to me at the time), I interviewed Scott and several people I knew in the Austin community who were adopted, then several other members of my family. I would decide how to connect everything—a macro analysis of adoption and my more microscopic family conflict—later on.

With my yet-to-be-titled documentary play, I found myself in the opposite position of *Matawan*. Because I felt so good about *Sow and Suckling*, I was eager to explore human beings within the strictest confines of reality. In addition to transcribing the interviews I was conducting, I would write scenes between myself and my family as well as I could remember them, including one between my uncle and I from over the summer. Here’s a sample:

**UNCLE SCOTT**

Look, he's family. But he's not *family*. You understand? This isn't the same as you or Ally or James or...

**DAN**

It's a different thing. I get that.

**UNCLE SCOTT**

He's a grown man. He's not some orphan on the street begging for porridge. And here's your mom and dad wanting to bring him to Obie's memorial. And they want to introduce him as Janine's nephew from Philadelphia or something?

**DAN**

Something like that.

**UNCLE SCOTT**

It's not right. They're just doing what they want. Not thinking about how this is gonna affect me. Me and my family. That hurts. No one's asked me about that.

**DAN**

I'm sorry.



## UNCLE SCOTT

For two brothers who've always gotten along...to just not be talking now? It's not right.

Now, I didn't record our conversation, but that's more or less how it went. And because this was something that had actually happened to me—a first in my writing—I viewed my adherence to reality as a virtue. But when we read the pages out loud in class, KJ and my colleagues pointed out how this actually didn't feel real at all. It may have been realistic in the information it was conveying, but it didn't have a soul. It didn't have a spirit. In sticking so close to reality, I had actually come up with something that was somehow both melodramatic and sterile.

KJ encouraged me to write about my own feelings surrounding the introduction of my cousin and the death of my grandfather, but without the word-for-word constraints. She explained that Documentary Theatre didn't always have to be an exact transcription of real-life events. Sometimes, it was better to capture the spirit of the thing.

To loosen up my mind, I drove to Bennu Coffee on MLK late at night, and instead of listening to interview transcriptions or trying to summon the most accurate parts of my memory, I watched video footage of my dad and his brothers speaking at my grandfather's funeral. I didn't write down any of the words. I just let it all flow through me. I let myself tear up. Afterwards, while listening to The Cure's *Disintegration* (one of my uncle's favorite albums), I wrote down every memory about my dad's family—good and bad—that came to me. I wrote down what I loved and missed about my grandfather. I wrote down what I loved about my uncle, as well as his flaws. The same with my dad. The same with my cousin.

At some point in my notebook, I had landed on our family's collective obsession with *Star Wars*. My dad and Uncle Scott had always bonded over the franchise, so much that they had taken to calling their father—my grandfather—"Obie" when they were kids after Obi-Wan Kenobi (I'm not sure where the alternate spelling came from). I thought about us all watching the movies together. I thought about my cousin James and I playing under the kitchen table with our *Star Wars* action figures, all of them passed down to us from my dad and his uncles from the 70s. I remember how my dad would make fun of how crappy the toys were—how Darth Vader's body looked like Lord Licorice from *Candy Land* and Chewbacca resembled an elongated turd. I smiled and I started to write.

What I came up with wasn't really about adoption, and it definitely didn't look like what I imagined a documentary play to be. The set was both my grandparents' beach community of Long Beach Island, NJ and the desert planet of Tatooine from the *Star Wars* films. I attribute this to "Plainsong," the opening track of *Disintegration*, which has always reminded me of standing on a beach at night. In keeping with my new aesthetic of South Jersey sci-fi, the characters were all real people from my family, but filtered through the universe of George Lucas. My dad and his brothers were Jedi knights in bathrobes, my cousin was an X-wing pilot whose aircraft had gotten shot down on the beach, etc. I tried to capture everyone's real-life feelings toward each other, even if I wasn't transcribing their actual conversations. For instance, I hadn't yet been in the same room with my dad and uncle after my grandfather died. But I had talked to each of them separately about their contentious feelings toward one another, so I drew what was useful from these experiences, then dropped the dialogue into a laser battle between the two men across the sand dunes.

True to KJ's word, when I shared these 30 or so new pages with the class, they felt much more real and much more captivating than what I had before—this strange tale of family members arriving and family members departing, filtered through Jersey beach life and *Star Wars*. In fact, everyone wanted *more* imagery from both of those worlds. At some point, I need to figure out how to incorporate a lifeguard party that takes place around a Sarlacc Pit instead of a bonfire.

I still need to finish my documentary play, which I've tentatively titled *King of the Beach* (although I think some kind of *Star Wars* reference would suit the title better than a Wavves album). I'm hoping to get around to completing it over the summer, but even if I don't, it was still a vital step in a more fully realized relationship with monsters, despite there not being any in the script. It helped me realize that all of my most successful plays have some kind of otherworldly element to them; something we wouldn't usually see in our everyday lives outside of the theatre. Laser battles and men forming out of stars have the same function as a killer shark and a murderous Santa, a function that comes straight from the grad-school application I wrote four years ago: to explore the vulnerability within human beings.

But much like mastering The Force, it requires balance on my part. My abandoned transcript pages of *King of the Beach* proved that my plays don't work when they run solely off of mundanity, just like *Little Triggers* proved that my plays don't work then they run solely off of monsters. If I can get these two elements—the realistic and the imaginative—to speak to each other, the humans take on more emotional depth and the monsters become more frightening. The scariest moment in the original *Star Wars* trilogy isn't Darth Vader's initial appearance in *A New Hope*, but one film later in *The Empire Strikes Back*, when an unwitting admiral walks in on the Sith Lord before his helmet is

completely secured. For the first time, we see that there's human flesh—pale, scarred, and delicate—underneath all of the hissing machinery and blackened armor. *Return of the Jedi* elaborates on this further when, unmasked once more in his dying moments, Vader expresses remorse to his son Luke Skywalker. The visual grotesqueries still exist—this time in closeup—but the monster has exposed its own vulnerability, and thus expanded the *ways* in which one can be scared—viscerally, as well as emotionally, psychologically, and thematically. What would it look like to tackle all of these different areas of horror within the space of a single play?

## 5. OKJA

As with *Sow and Suckling*, I started and completed a first draft of *The Amphibians* in a playwriting workshop at UT. This time, it was in the classroom of Alexandra Bassiakou Shaw, who asked us to each start working on a play without telling the rest of the class what it actually was. Instead of presenting first pages or even a pitch or an idea, we had to share a piece of art that connected to our story. It wasn't meant to be a guessing game for everyone; rather, a means of capturing the spirit of our own work before we ever put our pens to paper or fingers to the keyboard.

I brought in a clip from Bong Joon-ho's 2017 film *Okja*. Although the South Korean director is now best known to American audiences for *Parasite* (where the monsters are very, very human), I've been equally drawn to his films with non-human creatures. First, there was *The Host* in 2006, where a mutated, fish-like monster springs from the Han River and wreaks havoc on the city of Seoul. The creature soon goes into hiding after capturing the daughter of the highly dysfunctional Park family, making it not only an enemy of the military, but a catalyst for the Parks resolving their smaller domestic issues. Yes, the monster in *The Host* roars, gallops, climbs, swims, and kills a ton of people. But it's also there to inform and alter the journey of the film's human characters on a much smaller—but no less important—scope.

Besides being more endearing than frightening, *Okja*'s monster has a more central place in the narrative than the one in *The Host*—in this case, a specially bred “super pig” being cared for by a young girl named Mija. As the titular pig grows bigger and bigger, it becomes a highly sought-after specimen by both animal-rights activists and the

laboratory responsible for its genesis. But Mija finds herself on the outside of both groups' ideological desires. She just wants to spend time with her friend.

For our playwriting workshop, I showed a clip from the beginning of the film where Mija and Okja are wandering through a South Korean forest. We see how they play, how they eat, how Okja farts, poops, moves, and generally exists. To me, the scene shows how our bonds with non-human creatures are never as pure or simple as we think they are. As close as Mija and Okja are, it's impossible for them to exist independently of the rest of the world. Mija sees salvation and purity in Okja, but forgets that the pig has complicated connections to sociopolitical ideologies bigger than them both.

*The Amphibians* establishes a similar dynamic between two high-school girls, Bryn and Simone, and a seemingly wounded, half-serpentine/half-mammalian creature they discover in the woods of west central Florida. The play takes place roughly 13 years from now, after we've passed the point of no return in the fight against climate change, and at first, the girls view the creature as a distraction from the constant threat of natural disaster. But by the end of the play, they realize that the animal isn't actually wounded. It isn't a distraction from climate change at all, but a *product* of climate change. The red slashes on its side aren't wounds, but gills to help it survive the inevitable flooding of the forest. Where the creature has adapted to the bigger problems of the world, the girls have not. Although we've spent a great deal of the play enjoying Bryn and Simone bonding with their non-human friend, that bond becomes tainted by the time the curtain closes. Because humans have caused so much damage to the natural world, it's impossible to have a pure bond with the wild animals we love so much.

The first half of Alex's workshop was spent on generative exercises. We rarely discussed our actual plays, instead focusing on activities such as mapping out chakra

charts for our characters. Admittedly, this felt a little—to use Alex’s phrase—“woo-woo” to me at first. In spring of 2019, I tended to get really cranky when asked to engage with things like astrology, tarot cards, and chakras. I told Alex that at the end of one of our classes, and to my surprise, she agreed that it might be totally silly and not helpful and not at all my thing, which disarmed me. And I think that’s why I ended up doing it anyway. I sometimes adopt this false assumption that any mentor who asks me to do something outside of my normal writing routine believes that their way is the *only* way to write. And that’s simply not true. Alex wasn’t asking me to create chakra charts because she wanted me to believe in the practice wholeheartedly and apply it to my life. She just wanted me to try it and see if it was something worth adding to my toolbox as a writer.

And it was! Because I hadn’t yet started any actual pages, the chakra charts put me in a headspace where I was writing from a place of character rather than story. By calibrating the traits associated with the throat chakra, I figured out Bryn and Simone’s vastly different ways of communicating—Bryn being quieter but more outward with her desires and Simone being louder and more inward. The sacral chakra helped me figure out how their emotional states shifted as Bryn gained more power and status in their friendship. And the crown chakra and third eye helped me figure out where their feelings toward the creature forked by the play’s end (Simone viewing it as a friend and Bryn viewing it as an animal).

The *Okja* connection and chakra charts weren’t the only prep work I completed for *The Amphibians*. About a year earlier, I had applied for a commission initiative from Seattle-based theatre company Forward Flux Productions (currently on hiatus). The program was called Three New American Plays, and asked playwrights to submit full outlines for scripts about some kind of challenge currently facing our country. Although I

only advanced to the Semi-Finalist round, I came out of the process with a rough blueprint of my play. While a lot of the character beats had to be filled in (there were a good deal of vague sentences such as “Bryn and Simone get into some kind of fight”), I knew the big horizontal story turns that would have to happen.

As with anything related to my writing, I hadn’t planned out the abundance of prep work that went into *The Amphibians*. It just kind of happened due to circumstances that were out of my control. But intentional or not, the heavy preparation resulted in a play that came quickly and easily to me. Even if the first draft—written in just a week—hasn’t remained completely intact, all of the following big story moves have. And, in a departure from *Sow and Suckling*, they’ve remained intact for the majority of the script, rather than just one half of it.

1) Simone shows Bryn a seemingly wounded animal she found in the woods. 2) The girls agree to take care of the creature together amidst their fracturing friendship. 3) They temporarily forget about the climate crisis and restore their bond. 4) They soon realize that the animal isn’t wounded, and that its cuts are actually gills to help it prepare for climate-induced flooding. 5) This causes Bryn to further immerse herself in school activities and Simone to become somewhat of a hermit in the woods, spending as much time with the creature as possible before catastrophe strikes. 6) When it finally does, Bryn tries to get Simone to retreat to safety. 7) Simone refuses, they fight, and the creature ends up (perhaps mortally) wounding Bryn. 8) Right as the creature’s about to turn on Simone, the water rushes in and it swims away. Simone and Bryn are left among the rushing water without access to the outside world, their fates left uncertain.

Less than a year out from completing my first draft, I feel that the script’s editing is almost complete, which makes *The Amphibians* the fastest revision process I’ve ever



undertaken. I chalk it up to the combination of more abstract (or woo-woo!), character-driven exercises and a straightforward outline—mundanity meets imagination. I don't think I need to outline every single one of my scripts going forward, but it will benefit me to identify the function of the monster in each of my plays, especially if they're of the non-human persuasion.

With *The Amphibians* I knew *why* the girls discovered a giant half-serpent/half-mammal in the woods from the get-go. I knew exactly how it was going to inform their story and their friendship. I knew that they would view it as a sanctuary from the climate crisis, then as a stark reminder of its inevitability. I knew that the animal would be able to adapt and evolve in ways that they couldn't. After pulling apart humans and non-human monsters, I had finally stitched them back together and figured out how they could work in tandem with one another. The journey from *Sow and Suckling* to *The Amphibians*—the two plays where I finally learned how to revise and rewrite—also had a healthy demystification effect on my writing. By finally viewing the human parts and non-human parts of my plays as just that—parts—I felt emboldened to move them around and embark on an exercise where I discovered monsters could also be purely tactical.

## 6. JACK THE RIPPER

For my final year in grad school, Kirk Lynn asked if, given my interest in horror, I might want to embark on an independent study about the Grand Guignol plays, a genre of horror theatre that was extremely popular in Paris and later London in the late 19th and early 20th century. Despite the popularity, history has largely forgotten them; even the term “Grand Guignol” is seldom taught in college theatre classes. We would read however many Grand Guignol scripts we could find throughout fall of 2019, then figure out what we wanted to do with the information. Would we present some kind of seminar on the oft-ignored theatre movement to the school? Would we merely talk about them one-on-one? Something else?

After reading a few of the plays in our two main textbooks, *Grand-Guignol: The French Theatre of Horror* and *London's Grand Guignol and the Theatre of Horror* (both by Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson), I thought it would be useful to figure out what was effective and what was outdated in the old Grand Guignol plays. We would then use our findings to write new Grand Guignol plays that would hopefully resonate with modern audiences. Here's a quick rundown of which Grand Guignol trends we wanted to keep, which ones we wanted to scrap, and which ones we wanted to subvert.

### **Kept**

– Length: The original Grand Guignol plays were all between 10 and 20 minutes, with four to six performed in one evening. This format was a welcome challenge

to Kirk and myself, considering there are so many bad 10-minute play festivals out there and Kirk, in particular, has an aversion to the form.

– The Moment of Horror: Contrary to popular belief, Grand Guignol plays were not graphically violent throughout their runtime. Rather, they all ramped up to what Hand calls the “Moment of Horror,” the climactic sequence where all of the dread and tension explodes into some kind of violent spectacle with very convincing special effects (a ceiling crushing the characters to death, someone getting their throat slit, a face getting sloughed off). The Moment of Horror usually takes place in the final page of what tend to be 15- to 20-page scripts.

– A sense of place: The original Grand Guignol theater was situated in the seedy Pigalle neighborhood of Paris, which meant that patrons often witnessed sex acts, robbery, assault, and sometimes murder taking place outside on the street before they entered the building. A former cathedral, the venue was characterized by gothic architecture, rife with gargoyles, elaborately carved balconies, candelabras, and church pews that only added to an eerie atmosphere straight out of a Hammer film. While the F. Loren Winship Drama Building at UT Austin is nowhere near as chilling in its atmospherics, Kirk suggested we write plays that would utilize the structure’s own architectural idiosyncrasies. In one script, a man crawls out of Hell via a rope that extends the entirety of the hallway behind the Payne and Brockett theatre spaces. In another, a woman hosts an uncomfortable ASMR video in the cramped stairwell next to the Payne’s turntable. The second

play of the night featured a ghastly medical experiment in the lecture hall of room 2.112.

– Natural, not supernatural: Despite largely consisting of horror plays, the original Grand Guignol scripts were meant to be intensely realistic and cathartic, and thus intentionally avoided the supernatural. If there were any vampires, werewolves, zombies, or other traditional non-human monsters to be found, their paranormal traits were ambiguous. If a character was presented as having a thirst for blood, it was because they *thought* they were a vampire rather than actually being the real thing. You’re more likely to encounter someone who has succumbed to lunacy or rabies in a Grand Guignol play (as we see in Paul Atier’s “Lighthouse Keepers”) than any kind of actual mystical affliction. With the exception of a few vaguely defined demons, Kirk and I kept our plays firmly rooted in reality as well, focusing on suicidal individuals, vengeful lovers, and maniacs more in the vein of Jack the Ripper, who served as inspiration for Oscar Méténier’s Grand Guignol play—the aptly titled “Jack.”

### **Scrapped**

– Racism and misogyny: There’s no getting around it—with the movement starting in the late-19th century, many of the original Grand Guignol plays have misogynistic and xenophobic undertones (or overtones), particularly toward the Chinese (the Sino-French War had ended only 12 years before the opening of the theater). Kirk and I made a conscious effort to not depict every woman in our play

as the villain, and to ensure that we were equal-opportunity in our more transgressive moments, with no one group demonized or abused.

– Comedic plays: Until reading the Grand Guignol canon, I thought all of the plays fell into the horror genre. But it turns out that almost half of them were comedies—usually sex farces. In a typical Grand Guignol program, the plays would alternate between horror and comedy for a “hot-and-cold shower” effect, the oscillation seen as the ultimate form of catharsis. While I appreciate the contrast in styles, I’ve never found antiquated sex comedy to be that funny. I don’t think Shakespeare’s mistaken identities and dick jokes are funny, and I don’t think they’re funny in the Grand Guignol, either, even when penned by Noel Coward, who did indeed write a play in the London collection called “The Better Half.” More importantly, I just wasn’t interested in investigating the comedy of my non-Grand Guignol work. What makes people laugh onstage isn’t nearly as interesting to me as what makes them frightened. I feel like I often have a better understanding of how to be funny than how to be scary in my own writing. However, Kirk and I did come up with another method of exploring the hot-and-cold shower effect that lived outside of the plays themselves (see below section).

### **Subverted**

– Anthology format: Due to the lack of scholarship surrounding them, it’s hard to trace what—if any—connection Grand Guignol has to modern drama, horror or otherwise. Unsurprisingly, the short-form format felt more akin to horror

anthologies seen so frequently in modern films and comic books (think *Creepshow*, *Tales from the Crypt*, *Tales from the Dark Side*, *The Twilight Zone*, etc.). I started thinking about which stylistic traits from that format might translate well to the stage (or stairwell or lecture hall or hallway). Which brings me to...

– The host: The original Grand Guignol theatre (and subsequent theatrical movement that followed) was named after a French puppet character similar to the British Punch. That means Grand Guignol essentially translates to “Giant Puppet.” The fact that a puppet never features heavily in any of the Grand Guignol plays is a mystery and feels like a missed opportunity. So, in taking a note from the horror anthology format, I decided to give our new Grand Guignol plays a host who would serve several functions. First, they would finally justify the Grand Guignol namesake by starting off as a hand puppet who would greet the audience, then grow to a larger size every time they came out for an interlude. By the end, they would be twice the size of any human, contributing to the escalating sense of horror. But despite their jarring appearance, they would also be someone who could safely escort our audience throughout various locations in Winship. Finally, they would fulfill the dynamism of the hot and cold shower. But instead of alternating between horrific plays and funny plays, the host would step in after each violent vignette to provide some reprieve in the form of awful puns.

Ironically, my final project in grad school harkens back to my pre-grad school days in that Grand Guignol rarely ventured into sociopolitical commentary or any kind of

meaning or message. Both the horror plays and the comedy plays were pure manifestations of their genres' respective aesthetics. Because the only conscious purpose of Grand Guignol playwrights was catharsis, the plays tended to be *all* style. *All* mechanics. This is an area I'm not sure I ever had true mastery of, even with my early work. I knew how to fill plays like *Little Triggers* with imaginative monsters and imagery, but I didn't know how to actually use these elements toward tension and escalation. I just plopped them in there. But from the beginning of my Grand Guignol journey, it was clear that every single one of these playlets was a perfectly geared cuckoo clock, winding and winding and winding until the bird pops out and surprises everyone.

Unfortunately, Kirk and I haven't yet gotten to test if our own plays have a similar effect. We were supposed to produce them in my final semester, but the real-life horror story of the COVID-19 pandemic has put a quick halt on all productions in...well, everywhere. Even though we were cast, had a co-director in undergraduate student Emily Garcia, and were ready to begin rehearsals, we don't know if our new Grand Guignol plays are effectively frightening just yet. Hopefully we'll get to find out in the near future.

So this chapter ends in purgatory, with me still figuring out how the lessons of Grand Guignol will figure into my own work. It's been highly enjoyable to operate in a purely tactical headspace, but will the exercise give my full-length plays—work that I hope has both style *and* substance—a more deliberate sense of escalation? Time will tell.

## 7. GROVER

Since starting grad school and interrogating the relationship between monsters and humans in my plays, I've explored a variety of combinations. With *Sow and Suckling*, I steered clear of non-human monsters in favor of finding monstrous behavior inside humans. With *The Amphibians*, I devoted an equal amount of page-space to monsters *and* humans, then connected them to the same global catastrophe. With my most recent play, I've continued to split human and monster right down the middle, but, in yet another callback to *Nightbreed*, have reversed which characters' behavior comes off as being monstrous.

The play is called *Kaiju*, and it came out of me watching all 35 *Godzilla* films during the summer of 2019. In every single one of the movies, Godzilla and his supersized enemies/allies were always the most interesting part. Regardless of whether Godzilla was a hero, villain, or indifferent animal (it changes throughout the series), I always had an intense longing for him to come back onscreen. That same summer, I saw a show at the Vortex called *(Un)Documents* written by and featuring Jesús Valles, who crafted the one-person show around his experiences of arriving to the United States as an undocumented, queer person from Mexico. Comprised of journal entries, surrealist poems, and first-person recollections, the play was harder-hitting and stranger than any other piece of theatre I had seen about the oft-covered topic of immigration. I loved it.

Afterward, Susan, our friend and colleague Paul Kruse, and I stuck around for a post-show talkback that quickly went off the rails due to several audience members who literally asked Jesús how they could fix racism. I kept thinking about how ineffective the talkback was, especially compared to the powerful play we had just watched. Why wasn't



the moderator intervening? Why were we sitting through it? Why didn't we just get up and leave? Why didn't we say something to the aggravating audience members? Why wasn't I on my way home to watch *Godzilla vs. Destoroyah*? Why couldn't a 250-foot-tall monster rip off the theatre wall, peer in with its giant reptilian eye and show us what real change looked like?

As I made my way through the rest of the *Godzilla* films, I kept comparing the King of the Monsters' behavior to our own behavior at the talkback. Here was a creature who literally could not take a step without severely altering the human world. And here were us humans, trying desperately to enact some kind of change, but ending the evening by bickering and condescending to the one person in the room who had created something incredible that night. I couldn't stop thinking about the contrast, and soon got to work. From the get-go, I knew that I wanted *Kaiju* to be split into two distinct halves. The first act would show two giant monsters—one reptilian and one mammalian—debating the morality of their destruction. It was important to me that the creatures come across as empathetic and civilized, despite causing an epic amount of destruction and killing millions of people—however unknowingly.

The second act takes place inside a theater in the same city the monsters have destroyed, during a talkback very similar to the one I attended in real life. Even though there's clearly something alarming going on outside the building, the theatergoers believe it's their societal duty to talk about the play-within-a-play they've just watched. No matter how bad things get, they can't bring themselves to leave. And despite being human, they end up acting extremely animalistic toward each other, never actually discussing the play in any kind of substantive detail because they can't get through a single sentence without quarreling. In the final moments, the wall rips off to reveal the

giant eye of one of the monsters, revealing that both acts of *Kaiju* are roughly in the same location. The two monsters are right outside.

I only have a first draft of *Kaiju*, and so far, I've been fueled by it being a study in contrast; a first act that shows two beings who only know how to do and a second act that shows beings who only know how to talk. Pat Shaw elaborated on this further at the first (and so far only) read-through of *Kaiju*, pointing out how the first act explores destruction as a means of conversation, where the second act explores conversation (a very specific kind of conversation) as a means of destruction. Once again, the monstrous becomes human and the human becomes monstrous.

It's not lost on me that *Kaiju* sprung from two real events in my own life, something that seems to have become a trend since starting grad school. While the family in *Sow and Suckling* is very different from my own, they still contend with the same forces of repression and secrecy seen in the more explicitly autobiographical *King of the Beach*. And even if *The Amphibians* takes place in the future, I've always imagined Bryn and Simone as older versions of my nieces Jane and BobbieAnne. The play also takes place on a real-life nature preserve in the real-life Florida town I grew up in, and I'd be lying if I said Simone's rambling, desperate, heartbroken speech at the end of the play doesn't reflect my exact fears and anxieties about climate change.

And let's face it—the trend didn't *really* start in grad school, did it? I was still writing about myself and my family in *Little Triggers* and *Matawan*, despite not wanting to admit it at the time. Even now, I feel a little sheepish ending my thesis by locating myself, a human being, in my universe full of monsters. I'm still figuring out why. Does it come from not wanting to dump my own baggage all over the page and stage? Or maybe it's fear of falling into the playwright/grad-school cliché of becoming a character

in my own work. Or—please, no—maybe I know that recognizing my own humanity in my plays means also recognizing my own flaws and the flaws of the people I love. Maybe it means recognizing the monstrous behavior of us all.

I'm reminded of a classic piece of children's literature my mom would always read to me as a kid—*The Monster at the End of This Book: Starring Lovable, Furry Old Grover*, where the beloved *Sesame Street* character warns the reader not to finish the text, for it would mean certain doom. His pleas start out affable and polite, then grow more and more frantic with the turn of each page. By the time we've reached the end, Michael Smollin's illustrations of Grover are louder, larger, and even a little frightening. Of course, when we hit the last page, Grover realizes that the monster was him all along, and feels embarrassed for worrying so much. In the space of 21 pages, we see him accomplish the difficult feat of psychological integration. He accepts that being a monster means loving both the benevolent and the animalistic parts of himself.

I'm trying to do the same thing. As grad school and this document come to a close—and as you, dear reader, have now flipped to the last page—I'm telling myself to get over myself; to accept that I write about monsters as a means of writing about my life, whether in theme, story, belief, or character. The monsters are better for it, and so are my plays. And why wouldn't they be? Being human always has been—and always will be—pretty damn scary.

## **SOW AND SUCKLING**

By Dan Caffrey

## **CHARACTERS**

**ROGER:** 42.

**DOREEN:** Married to Roger. 40.

**RJ:** Son to Doreen and Roger. 12. Can be played by an adult, if necessary.

**POPPY:** Daughter to Doreen and Roger. 10. Can be played by an adult, if necessary.

**JACK:** Best friend to Roger. 42.

**RALPH:** 42.

**Note:** While all but one of the above characters are supposed to be related, it's not important that they look alike or resemble a family in the biological sense. Please use this as an opportunity to cast in a way that reflects the community where the play is being performed.

## **TIME**

Christmas Eve, 1982.

## **PLACE**

A lavish Victorian home in London.

On the first story, a dining room connects to a living room with a sofa, fireplace, and elaborately decorated Christmas tree.

Adjacent to the living room is a den area with two cushy armchairs and a large picture window. A kitchen resides somewhere offstage.

A hallway between the living room and den leads to an offstage bathroom.

A staircase ascends to a second-floor landing with another hallway. The hallway leads to the family's bedrooms and an additional bathroom, although we never see any of these spaces.

## **PUNCTUATION**

An ellipsis (...) indicates a deliberately unfinished, stalled, or evaporated line of dialogue. Three dashes (---) indicate interrupted dialogue, or dialogue that continues after a stage direction or line from another character. A slash (/) indicates dialogue that is interrupted by another character, but overlaps with the next line.

“Although everything around us was so delightful, and we could without difficulty obtain all that we required for our bodily comfort, we did not quite like the idea of settling down here for the rest of our lives, far away from our friends and our native land.”

—R. M. Ballantyne, *The Coral Island*

“There are pigs here.”

—William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*

*RJ sits on the floor in the living room, gazing into the crackling fireplace.*

*DOREEN, enters with a stack of six plates, in the middle of singing Greg Lake's "I Believe In Father Christmas." She merrily sets the table, not noticing RJ.*

**DOREEN** (*singing*)

"And I believed in Father Christmas.

And I looked to the sky with excited eyes.

'Til I woke with a yawn in the first light of dawn

And I saw him and through his disguise."

*She hums the instrumental bridge and unfolds six cloth napkins.*

**DOREEN** (*singing*)

"I wish you a hopeful Christmas.

I wish you a brave New---"

*A phone rings from off.*

**DOREEN** (*shouting to no one in particular*)

I'll get it!



*She exits back into the kitchen. We hear one side of a muffled phone conversation, but can't make out the words. RJ turns his head toward the kitchen and listens. The phone call ends.*

*RJ goes back to watching the fire as Doreen reenters with six sets of silverware. She lingers in the doorway, stone-faced. She breathes in, pops a smile, and goes back to setting the table.*

**DOREEN** (*singing*)

"They said there'll be snow at Christmas.

They said there'll be peace on Earth.

Hallelujah Noel, be it Heaven or Hell,

The Christmas we get, we deserve."

*RJ giggles. Startled, Doreen drops the final set of silverware on the floor.*

**DOREEN**

RJ.

**RJ**

Mother.

**DOREEN**

I didn't see you there, my love.

*She watches RJ watching the fire.*

**DOREEN**

Is the telly busted, then?

**RJ**

No. The fire is more interesting.

**DOREEN**

Ah.

*She joins RJ at the fire and gazes into it.*

**DOREEN**

It most certainly is.

*She breaks away from the fire and picks up the silverware she dropped.*

**DOREEN**

Have you seen your sister?

**RJ**

Always. Shall I fetch her?

**DOREEN**

Please and thank you.

*She places the silverware back on the table.*

**DOREEN**

Dinner will be ready soon.

**RJ**

And what shall we be having this year? Can we expect the customary roast goose, turkey swimming in gravy, or—Heaven, please—Yorkshire pudding?

**DOREEN**

It's something we've never had before. A surprise.

**RJ**

It smells wild.

*Pause.*

**RJ**

That is a compliment, Mother. Wild is healthy. Wild is good.

**DOREEN**

Where did you hear that?

**RJ**

‘Tis an original thought.

**DOREEN**

Don’t say “‘Tis.” It makes you sound Irish.

**RJ**

Cannot you appreciate wildness, Mother, if not Irishness?

**DOREEN**

One can be wild in certain cases. But not *all* the time. Indoors, for instance. Well, maybe in private. But *never* in front of other people. Being wild in front of other people isn’t very polite. It’s important to be polite. Polite is right, as they say.

**RJ**

It is why I always cross my pleases and dot my thank-yous.

**DOREEN**

Yes.

*She taps RJ on the nose.*

**DOREEN**

You're very good at that.

**RJ**

Just so I am clear, an enterprising lad such as myself has occasional permission to be wild. But only outside. And if he is inside, his wildness must be conducted behind closed doors.

**DOREEN**

That's exactly it. Brilliant deduction skills, RJ.

**RJ**

And what of Father?

**DOREEN**

What of him?

**RJ**

When he was marooned as a boy, were he and his school chums not impolite and wild on their beloved island? And perhaps even a wee bit naughty?

**DOREEN**

They had a penchant for warpaint, if that's what you mean. And for island games that may have resulted in the occasional good-natured scrape or two. Remember, they were

only 12. The same age as you. But their wildness was born out of necessity, and that same adventurous spirit led to immense strength and a most dutiful sense of order: huts constructed on the beach, fruit and nuts gathered for sustenance. Most important of all, a fire burning on the mountain. (*sing-songy*) That glowing, growing, reddening fountain. The fire was your Uncle Jack's idea. Granted, the flames did get out of hand and burnt the entire mass of land to a crisp. But it's also what allowed everyone to get rescued. December 24th, 1952. Exactly thirty years ago to the day. It's why we celebrate your father and his friends every Christmas Eve.

**RJ**

I am aware, Mother. For I have perused the newspaper clippings.

**DOREEN**

And marveled at the magazine covers.

**RJ**

And listened to the radio serials. Did you know that a young Dudley Moore voiced Father on the BBC dramatization?

**DOREEN**

It was one of his first roles.

**RJ**

A true honour. For both Father and Sir Moore.

**DOREEN**

I couldn't agree...*more*. Ha!

**RJ**

Ha.

**DOREEN**

Oh, that is funny.

**RJ**

Smashing job, Mother. Now about this feast. At the very least, can you confirm that we will be supping upon animal?

**DOREEN**

It isn't good British manners to refer to our dinner as an animal.

**RJ**

I disagree.

**DOREEN**

Perhaps you'd like a good rapping on the knuckles with the butter knife.

**RJ**

I would not.

**DOREEN**

Then listen closely. When you cook something—when you kill it and clean it and cook it---

**RJ**

Did you do all of those things, Mother?

**DOREEN**

Well no. I would never be allowed to, nor do I have the skills. But I did prepare it. And I cooked it. And I shall serve it. And when you do all of that—when you take the time, when you take the care—it is no longer an animal. It is something else. Something beautiful.

**RJ**

Are animals not already beautiful?

**DOREEN**

Yes, darling.

**RJ**

I think a cow or a mule or a rooster is just as beautiful as a stag. Or a colt. Or an Irish Setter.



**DOREEN**

I think so, too.

**RJ**

And I would happily eat them all.

*Doreen looks at her watch, even though she's not wearing one.*

**DOREEN**

Oh, would you look at the time! *(sing-songy)* A-ring-a-ding-ding, flap your fluffy little wings. Run along and find your sister. I want you both washed up with hands folded by the time your father gets home.

**RJ**

And what of Father Christmas? Will he be making an appearance tonight?

**DOREEN**

Only if you're a good little boy.

**RJ**

Oh, I will be. I will be. And may this good little boy stake the holly?

**DOREEN**

Of course.

**RJ**

Capital! For that is my favourite part. Once the drinks have been poured and the adults have been fattened, I derive such pleasure from thrusting the old holly sprig down into the soft skin of the Christmas pudding. When the act is complete, Father Christmas always emerges from the hallway with gifts for all. It is magical. But I must say, his offerings are never as satisfactory as those brought by Uncle Jack. He has always been my favourite friend of Father.

**DOREEN**

And mine as well.

**RJ**

Uncle Harold was tolerable, aside from his church-mouse meekness. Uncle Robert told the heartiest jokes. And Uncle Bill spun the most thrilling stories of the island. But I have a hard time recalling anything at all about Uncle Henry.

**DOREEN**

You were very young when he died.

**RJ**

Nevertheless---

*He solemnly bows his head.*

**RJ**

---I miss him dearly.

**DOREEN**

As do I. I miss them all. But at least we still have Uncle Jack. Oh, and Uncle Maury, of course.

**RJ**

Uncle Maury is a generous man, but slovenly and rotund.

**DOREEN**

It really is time to wash up.

**RJ**

It is as if he received all of the unhealthy parts of Father Christmas, yet none of the magic.

**DOREEN**

*Now.* Or I'll phone your uncle—*both* of your uncles—*and* Father Christmas and instruct them not to bring any presents for you at all.

*RJ doesn't move. Doreen picks up a butter knife from the table and wags it at him.*

**DOREEN**

Or perhaps you'd like the butter knife this year.

**RJ**

Never!

*He runs halfway up the stairs, then stops.*

**RJ**

By the way. I was only kidding about the dog.

*Pause.*

**RJ**

The Irish Setter.

**DOREEN**

I should hope so.

**RJ**

I would never eat a dog. I love them too much. Dogs understand me.

**DOREEN**

Oh, RJ.

*She sets down the butter knife.*

**DOREEN**

Is that what all this talk of wildness is about? You miss your Mr. Crisps?

**RJ**

No.

**DOREEN**

Oh?

**RJ**

*Most* dogs understand me. Mr. Crisps did not.

*Pause.*

**RJ**

Unfortunately.

*Pause.*

**DOREEN** (*sing-songy*)

All littluns in want of gifts should lather their arms from elbow to wrist.

**RJ**

Yes, Mother. Happy Christmas!

*He runs up the rest of the stairs and disappears into the hallway. Doreen watches him go, cocking her head slightly.*

**DOREEN**

My compellingly odd little man.

*She sits down in front of the fireplace and tries to enjoy the warmth.*

**DOREEN**

Hmmm.

*She stares into the fire, entranced by it. She wipes sweat from the back of her neck.*

**DOREEN**

My. It's a bit stuffy in here.

*She goes to the window and opens it. She fans herself, trying to enjoy the cold. A plastic arrow flies in from the window and strikes her in the head.*

**DOREEN**

Ow!

*She picks up the arrow and looks at it in her hand.*

**DOREEN**

Is that...

*Another arrow flies in, just missing her. Doreen rushes to the window and shouts below.*

**DOREEN**

Poppy Cockburn, you march your frilly little bloomers up here at *once*!

*The voice of a young girl shouts something inaudible from outside.*

**DOREEN**

I don't care if your brother was playing in the snow! Now get inside! You'll catch cold!

*She shuts the window and locks it. She disappears into the kitchen, then returns with a box of baking soda. She dumps it all over the flames, snuffing out the fire.*

*POPPY enters, talking a mile a minute. She brandishes a bow and has a quiver of plastic arrows slung around her shoulder. Her face is streaked with red.*

**POPPY**

I'm-sorry-Mummy-oh-I'm-sorry-before-you-get-mad-please-know-I-was-only-pretending-I-was-on-the-island-and-never-intended-to-get-the-measles-or-the-mumps-or---

**DOREEN**

Have you been stealing your brother's toys again?

**POPPY**

If I had my own bow and arrow, then I wouldn't have to take his.

**DOREEN**

Hand them over.

**POPPY**

But Mummy---

**DOREEN**

Now.

**POPPY**

Ugggh. I hate that word.

*She hands over the bow, quiver, and remaining arrows to Doreen.*



**DOREEN**

Thank you. And what is this rubbish all over your cheeks?

**POPPY**

Warpaint.

*Doreen rubs some of it off on her finger.*

**DOREEN**

My lipstick!

**POPPY**

You said I could try some.

**DOREEN**

On your *lips*.

**POPPY**

I did that, too. Seeeeee?

*She exaggeratedly pouts her lips, which are the same bright-red shade as her cheeks.*

**POPPY**

At first, I wanted to be a model. But then I thought it would also make for good warpaint. So why not do both? I'm a warrior with lipstick. Or a supermodel with warpaint. I can't decide which. And I don't have to.

**DOREEN**

You're neither.

*She wipes off the lipstick with her hands.*

**POPPY**

Mummy!

**DOREEN**

You're a 10-year-old girl. You shouldn't be using lipstick for such crude purposes. It's not right.

**POPPY**

But Daddy said how he and Uncle Jack and Uncle Maury and all the others on the island would cover their faces with bits of fruit and clay from the earth. Why can't I do the same?

**DOREEN**

Because they were little boys.

**POPPY**

So? I'm little.

**DOREEN**

Their warpaint was a means of survival.

**POPPY**

How? They weren't fighting anyone.

**DOREEN**

For hunting, then.

**POPPY**

They lived off of fruit!

**DOREEN**

They put on warpaint to survive! Period. Where as with you, it's...I can't even begin to say *what* this is. Stalking through the snow with no coat, face all done up like a savage, trying to make an apple of your poor old mum's head.

*Poppy starts crying.*

**DOREEN**

Now honey, what's...It hurts my heart to see you cry.

**POPPY**

I just want to know how I'm supposed to act!

*Doreen kneels down and softly holds Poppy by the shoulders.*

**DOREEN**

Don't stir up trouble. It's as simple as that. Otherwise, you'll make your life much harder than it needs to be. Trust me on this, my love.

**POPPY**

Was your life once harder?

**DOREEN**

I...Why would you ask...

*Pause.*

**DOREEN**

When I was younger.

*Pause.*

**DOREEN**

Perhaps.

*She smiles.*

**DOREEN**

Be polite. Dress right. *(sing-songy)* And leave the dangerous toys to the sly little boys.

*RJ enters from the upstairs hallway and lingers on the landing.*

**RJ**

Poppy is nowhere to be found, Mother. I believe she is outside, getting into the snips and the snails and the puppy-dog tail and... Oh hullo, Poppy. I did not see you there.

Attention! Attention, everyone! It would appear I have found my little sister Poppy.

**DOREEN**

You're a wonderful big brother, RJ. And a smashing lookout.

**RJ**

It is in my genes.

**DOREEN**

Would you kindly help your sister to wash up?

**RJ**

Of course, Mother.

**DOREEN**

Go wait in the bathroom, please. Poppy will be joining you in a moment.

*RJ exits back into the hallway. Doreen kneels back down to Poppy.*

**DOREEN**

Change into your Christmas dress. Think of it as a new skin. Then let your brother wipe all of those smudges off your face. And put on a good attitude for the holiday. A sweet attitude. Please? For me?

**POPPY**

All right.

**DOREEN**

And for Father Christmas and your own father and his friends. You know how important this night is to them.

**POPPY**

I think those last two sentences rhymed, Mummy.

**DOREEN**

Oh, bless you.

*She hugs Poppy and kisses her forehead.*

**DOREEN**

I love you, Poppy. I hope you know that.

**POPPY**

I love you, too, Mummy.

*A male voice booms from offstage, humming "Good King Wenceslas."*

**DOREEN**

That would be your father. Upstairs with you now! Quickly, quickly!

*Poppy runs upstairs and into the bedroom.*

*Doreen stares at one of the arrows in her hand as the humming gets closer. She strides to the window, raises the arrow to the bow, and fires it into the cold evening air. She gasps with delight.*

*With the humming right outside the door, she tosses the bow, arrows, and quiver under the Christmas tree. ROGER bursts in, wearing a winter overcoat and carrying a briefcase.*

**ROGER (singing)**

"Good King Wenceslas looked out  
On the feast of Stephen."

*Doreen takes his overcoat and hangs it up on the coat rack.*

**ROGER** (*singing*)

“When the snow lay round about,  
Deep and crisp and even.”

**DOREEN**

Such a lovely voice. Even after all these years.

**ROGER**

That’s the benefit of being a former choirboy. You have a soprano inside you for the rest of your life.

**DOREEN**

Where? In here?

*She pokes Roger’s belly.*

**ROGER** (*laughing*)

Stop that. Stop that at once!

**DOREEN** (*poking*)

Where’s your choirboy? Where’s that tan and handsome boy soprano? May I speak to him?



**ROGER** (*laughing*)

He's asleep! I swear to it!

*He and Doreen collapse on the sofa together.*

**DOREEN**

I'm glad you're home.

**ROGER**

Believe me, I'm glad to *be* home.

**DOREEN**

Rough-and-tumble day at the Exchange?

**ROGER**

More rough than tumble.

**DOREEN**

Oh no!

**ROGER**

I'll survive.

**DOREEN**

Shall we discuss it?

**ROGER**

I wouldn't want to bore you. Or myself, for that matter. I'd rather contemplate the night ahead. The crackers and the gifts and the fireplace.

*He sees that the fire has been put out.*

**ROGER**

A *lit* fireplace, I should say. And why is the window open?

**DOREEN**

It was getting sweaty in here.

**ROGER**

I'm never one to mind a little sweatiness.

*He mock-attacks Doreen on the sofa.*

**DOREEN (*laughing*)**

No! Oh no, good sir!

**ROGER**

The Leather Apron strikes again!

**DOREEN** (*laughing*)

But I'm a woman of honour!

**ROGER**

I must have another victim. My lucky sixth!

**DOREEN**

There will be plenty of time for *that* later, Roger James Cockburn. But we have company arriving.

**ROGER**

A most excellent point. Why don't you tend to those tongues of flame? Get them chatting again.

*Doreen goes to the fireplace and picks up a fire iron. She shuffles around the ashes.*

**DOREEN**

Are you excited to see Jack tonight?

**ROGER**

Of course.

**DOREEN**

It will do him some good to see the children. To see us.

**ROGER**

To see Maurice.

*Doreen abruptly stops shuffling the ashes.*

**DOREEN**

Yes.

*She sets down the fire iron and turns to Roger.*

**DOREEN**

Maurice.

**ROGER**

*That's* what the holiday is about. Friendship. And love, of course. And family. Three things I happen to have in abundance.

*Doreen joins him again on the sofa.*

**DOREEN**

Happy Christmas to my sweet husband!

**ROGER**

And an *extra*-Happy Christmas to my sweet wife!

*They rub their noses together.*

**ROGER**

What a splendid present.

*He sinks back into the sofa. Doreen puts her head on his shoulder. After a few moments, she begins singing softly—eyes still closed.*

**DOREEN** (*singing*)

“Good King Wenceslas looked out  
On the feast of Stephen---”

**ROGER**

It seems I’ve gotten it stuck in your head.

**DOREEN**

It’s been stuck there for most of my life. How loudly and clearly you and your friends sang it as you boarded that battlecruiser. After two glorious months of dancing around bonfires and swinging from vines into lagoons. We should all be so lucky.

**ROGER**

Come now, Doreen.

**DOREEN**

What?

**ROGER**

You always speak of the island as if you were actually there.

**DOREEN**

Sometimes it feels like I was. After all, I saw it on the news bulletins---

**ROGER**

And fished out every discarded copy of the *Post* you could find---

**DOREEN**

And read about it again and again and again in *Time* magazine. / January 12th, 1953 edition.

**ROGER** (*finishing the sentence with Doreen*)

January 12th, 1953 edition.

*Doreen laughs.*

**ROGER**

We all know the story!

**DOREEN**

And for good reason! Your face and body shone through all of the other boys on the cover. The dark hair. The broad shoulders. The brave face and quizzical mouth. I just knew you were something special. An eternal optimist who had a love for adventure and taking care of others. It's why I begged my father for a ticket to the Welcome Home reception, even though I knew we couldn't afford it. I came to you with eyes bashful and palms open. Do you remember, Rog?

**ROGER**

Yes, darling.

*He and Doreen clasp hands.*

**ROGER**

Your tiny hands overflowing with sweet-meats.

**DOREEN**

I spilled lemon curd all over my plum-coloured Christmas dress, I was so nervous. Daddy was furious, of course, and I knew there would be punishment later. Nothing made him angrier than one of his daughters making a mess of themselves.

**ROGER**

He was one to talk. Always covered in soot and reeking of gin.

**DOREEN**

I hadn't a lick of experience with romance. And from what I could gather, neither did you.

**ROGER (*playfully*)**

I'll never tell.

**DOREEN**

You looked at me for a good long while, then over to Jack, as if asking him with your eyes what you should do. He just nodded. Slowly. Solemnly. His shock of red hair curtaining his face. So you sang. Again. What was the melody that time?

**ROGER**

"In the Bleak Midwinter."

**DOREEN**

A most joyous tune. Maurice...He was the first to join in. Then Henry, Harold, Robert, and Bill. Jack came last.



**ROGER**

Singing was somehow easier than talking in those early days. Back when the island was still so close to us.

*He clears his throat and sings.*

**ROGER** (*singing*)

“Good King Wenceslas looked out  
On the feast of Stephen.”

**DOREEN** (*singing*)

“When the snow lay round about,  
Deep and crisp and even.”

**ROGER** (*singing*)

“Brightly shone the moon that night...”

*He opens his mouth to sing the next line, but stops.*

**ROGER**

Strange. I’ve forgotten what comes next. Something about being cruel, isn’t it?

**DOREEN**

Exactly.

**ROGER**

Funny word to be in a Christmas song. Though I suppose it makes sense, given the source material. Good King Wenceslas—the *real* Good King Wenceslas—he was killed by his brother. Boleslav, I believe his name was. Yes, Boleslav invited Wenceslas to supper, then kebabbed him with a giant lance. Right in front of their dinner guests. Can you believe it? Why, if anyone ever knew the true story of Good King Wenceslas, they would simply fall over and---

**DOREEN** (*a small outburst*)

Maurice is dead!

*She covers her mouth.*

**ROGER**

What did you say?

*Doreen slowly removes her hand from her mouth.*

**DOREEN**

Maurice is dead.

*Pause.*

**DOREEN**

That is, he has died.

**ROGER**

When?

**DOREEN**

Last night. Jack phoned earlier from the police station.

**ROGER**

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God, oh God...

*Pause.*

**ROGER**

I owed old Maurice a game of squash, you know. Tonight would have been the first instance of us meeting in person since...I can't even remember. Since last Christmas, I suppose. The last anniversary feast. Is that the only sliver of time reserved for boyhood friends these days? One measly day—one measly *meal*—out of the year?

*He begins to cry softly.*

**DOREEN**

Oh Rog...

**ROGER**

First, Henry back in '79. Then Harold and Robert in the same year. Bill last March, and now Maurice. It's an ugly pattern.

**DOREEN**

Of boys becoming men. Of men becoming middle-aged.

**ROGER**

Don't say that.

**DOREEN**

You're not children anymore.

**ROGER**

We've survived so much together. To not survive our forties...

**DOREEN**

It's a brittle biscuit to swallow. We all know Maurice wasn't in the best of shape.

**ROGER**

He certainly wasn't.

*He wipes his eyes and looks up at Doreen, desperately.*

**ROGER**

Not like your big, strong man, eh? I've been doing curls, you know.

**DOREEN**

Have you now?

**ROGER**

It was meant to be a Christmas surprise. For you. For the children. It's just curls for the moment. After the holiday, I'll brass myself up to a full workout. Squats, sit-ups, all those machines with the horrific rods and cables. But for the time being, the hardness in my arms is enough. I have always enjoyed hardness. And the curls only take five minutes to complete. In and out.

**DOREEN**

That's wonderful, dear.

**ROGER**

Maurice never attended gym. I'm sure that didn't help matters. Although it could have been any number of natural causes that did him in. His diabetes. His heart problems. His gout.

**DOREEN**

I'm not sure if gout can---

**ROGER**

But it will take more than a club foot to get the best of old Roger Cockburn! You'll see.

**DOREEN**

I believe in you!

**ROGER**

What shall we tell the children?

**DOREEN**

We shan't tell them anything. At least not tonight.

**ROGER**

But Maurice will be over any minute now. If he were alive, that is.

**DOREEN**

We will cover for Maurice's absence. Which means you shall take on his most famous role.

**ROGER**

Me? Play Father Christmas??

**DOREEN**

You have to!

**ROGER**

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, I am working through my grief and am in no such state!

**DOREEN**

The cap and coat are hanging in the wardrobe.

**ROGER**

Doreen!

**DOREEN**

They may need a good dusting.

**ROGER**

Have Jack do it.

**DOREEN**

Jack doesn't possess the right body type.

**ROGER**

I am a touch heavier than Jack. I shall grant you that. But I'm nowhere near as slovenly and rotund as Maurice. I'll never fill out that suit!

**DOREEN**

Then I suggest you start stuffing it with newspaper.

**ROGER**

I can't. That's a dead man's suit now.

**DOREEN**

Don't you want your children to have a decent Christmas?

**ROGER**

Of course I do.

**DOREEN**

Well?

*Pause.*

**DOREEN**

I appreciate the delicateness of the situation. I do. Maurice was my friend as well. But this is our *family*, Roger. Not our friend, but our *family*. Imagine the horror of RJ and Poppy discovering that one of their uncles—the one who played Father Christmas, no less—has died on the holiday. Their little angel-food hearts would crumble into dust. Do you understand?

*Pause.*



**DOREEN**

I said do you / understand, Rog?

**ROGER**

Fine, then! I'll wear the bloody suit.

**DOREEN**

Promise me.

**ROGER**

I promise.

**DOREEN**

You promise what?

**ROGER**

I promise to play both Father and Father Christmas tonight. I will jingle my bells and ho-ho-ho and put out the presents until I go cross-eyed and crash face-first into my figgy pudding.

**DOREEN**

Oh, Rog!

*She throws her arms around Roger.*

**DOREEN**

Thanks be to my sweet husband.

**ROGER**

And thanks be to my sweet wife.

*They rub noses again, more hurried than before.*

**ROGER**

Enough of this morbid business. Where are the littluns? For I wish to see them.

**DOREEN**

Poppy! RJ!

*The children immediately dash out of the upstairs hallway. Poppy—newly clean and wearing a dress with a big bow on it—runs downstairs to Roger while RJ lingers on the landing.*

**POPPY**

Daddy, Daddy!

*Roger scoops her up in his arms.*

**DOREEN**

That's a lovely dress you're wearing, Poppy.

**POPPY**

It has a *different* kind of bow. Right, Mummy?

**DOREEN**

Right as rain, my beautiful one.

**ROGER**

You rushed out of your bedroom so quickly. Were you two eavesdropping, you little sneaks?

**POPPY**

Noooo...

**RJ**

We were, Father.

**ROGER**

For how long?

**RJ**

Oooh, about 226 seconds or so.

*He descends the stairs to the first floor.*

**ROGER**

Clever lad. A real mathemagician!

**DOREEN**

And did you hear anything your father and I were discussing?

**POPPY**

We did not.

**DOREEN**

Let us hope so. Father Christmas shows no favor to loose lips and spiced ears.

**RJ**

Do not worry, for we were unable to decipher any of your dialogue. The door is too thick.

But we did hear Father crying.

**DOREEN**

He wasn't crying.

**POPPY**

Why were you crying, Daddy?

**DOREEN**

Now, now, Poppy. Remember what we---

**POPPY**

It's okay if you were.

**DOREEN**

Your father never cries.

**POPPY**

I was crying earlier, too.

**DOREEN**

Your father is *strong*.

**POPPY**

I cry a lot.

**DOREEN**

Roger, please tell them that you weren't crying.

**ROGER**

I wasn't crying.

**DOREEN**

And that you're not sad about anything.

**ROGER**

I wasn't sad about anything.

**DOREEN**

Mind your tenses.

**ROGER**

I *am not* sad about anything. Oh, I thought there *was* something to be sad about.

**DOREEN**

Keep it light.

**ROGER**

But there's not.

**DOREEN**

Light and polite.

**ROGER**

I'm very happy, actually.

**DOREEN**

That's the ticket!

**ROGER**

Happy it's Christmas. Happy I get to spend time with you all. Happy that tonight I get to see my boyhood chum. *Chums*, I mean. Chums! Two of them, as it were. Happy for this wonderful dinner we're about to enjoy.

**RJ**

Should we not wait for our uncle-friends to arrive?

**ROGER**

Uncle Jack is tied up with some business down at the station. He shall be late as a result. And Uncle Maury is...

**POPPY**

Is what, Daddy?

**RJ**

Has he gotten stuck in his own bathtub? He is quite slovenly and rotund.

**ROGER**

No, no. He's...he's...

**DOREEN**

Visiting his mummy!

**POPPY**

Isn't his mummy dead?

**DOREEN**

His mummy-in-law, then.

**POPPY**

Oh.

**DOREEN**

The point is, he's not coming.

**RJ**

That is fine. The more I have pondered it, the more Uncle Maury reminds me of the former American president William Howard Taft. The girth. The slowness. The bushy bush of a mustache.

**DOREEN**

Uncle Maury has always been nice to you.



**RJ**

Yes. But two Christmases ago when he took me to Covent Garden, we found ourselves having to use the WC. While standing at the urinal, Uncle Maury dropped his trousers *and* his knickers all the way down around his ankles as if he were a little boy. Then he leaned with one arm against the wall while he piddled, huffing and puffing all the while like a walrus having a heart attack. His bottom was large and white and pockmarked in the same style as Lorraine cheese. The event disturbed me and made me think much less of him—to witness this grown man piddling with his trousers and knickers around his ankles like a little boy. I do not care for Uncle Maury as much as I used to. But if I may ask, has he at least sent an emissary with gifts from afar?

**POPPY**

I hope so. His presents are *much* better than Uncle Jack's.

**RJ**

How dare you.

**POPPY**

It's the truth.

**RJ**

Even when our other uncle-friends were alive and we were showered with gifts throughout the year, Uncle Jack always made sure to pay the most splendid of tributes. *Always.*

**POPPY**

For you, maybe.

**DOREEN**

Poppy, remember our little chat from earlier.

**POPPY**

All I'm saying is that last year, RJ got his bow and arrow while I got a sparkly baton. The year before that, he got a pop-gun and I got stuck with a stupid kaleidoscope with wobbly beads that wouldn't even turn over right.

**DOREEN**

I'm sure Uncle Jack bought wonderful presents for you both. The same goes for Uncle Maury. He was always good—*is* always good—about such things. You'll receive them later. Perhaps in the New Year. Right, Roger?

*Roger has gone misty-eyed, gazing off into the distance. Doreen smacks his shoulder.*

**DOREEN**

Right?

**ROGER**

Whuh?

**DOREEN**

Maurice's presents.

*Roger wipes his eyes.*

**ROGER**

Yes. Yes! You'll be receiving them later. Much, *much* later. But do you know who you *will* be receiving presents from tonight?

**RJ**

Uncle Jack!

**ROGER**

Yes, but who else? Think for a moment.

**RJ (*thinking*)**

It's...

**POPPY (*thinking*)**

It's...

*RJ and Poppy look at each other with excitement.*

**RJ AND POPPY**

Father Christmas!

**ROGER**

Precisely! But only if you're good little children. Now come here. All of you. You, too, Doreen. All of you, come here. Please. Just for a moment. I need this. God. Come here.

*They all huddle together on the sofa, arms around one another.*

**ROGER**

My family. My beautiful family.

*They all stare into the dead fireplace.*

**DOREEN**

Oh, how I wish we had a maid who could take a picture of this. Such a precious moment.

**ROGER**

Perhaps you'll receive a late Christmas present this year.

**RJ**

I have always wanted a maid...

**ROGER**

And why not? Why shouldn't my family get everything they want? Even if my children are a couple of imps!

*He tickles RJ and Poppy. They laugh.*

**ROGER**

A couple of Gremlins!

**POPPY**

What's a Gremlin, Daddy?

**ROGER**

It's a little green monster that chews the wires on airplanes.

**DOREEN**

Perhaps we should keep the death-talk to a minimum? Seeing as it's Christmas and all.

**ROGER**

Ah, but not for another five hours. And what's all this about death-talk? It's not death-talk.

**DOREEN**

It's not very festive.

**ROGER**

It's life-talk! Contrary to popular belief, a great many souls walk away from plane crashes unscathed. Lord knows I did. Though I often wonder if justice may have been better served by me simply perishing.

**POPPY**

Wait, what?

**DOREEN**

I have an idea! Let us all enjoy a snort of port.

**POPPY**

That was a serious and scary thing to say, Daddy.

**DOREEN**

How does that sound?

**ROGER**

I would love some port.

**POPPY**

You deserving to die.

**RJ**

I would also like some port, Mother.

**DOREEN**

Anyone else?

**POPPY**

I would.

**DOREEN**

Anyone?

**POPPY**

Mummy!

**RJ**

Did Gremlins play a part in crashing *your* plane, Father?

**ROGER**

You know, I hadn't thought of that.

**DOREEN**

RJ, fetch the glassware.

**RJ**

In a moment, Mother.

*Doreen disappears into the kitchen.*

**POPPY**

Hullo??

**ROGER**

I saw my first Gremlin in the Roald Dahl book of the same name.

**RJ**

Oh, I adore Mr. Dahl.

**DOREEN** (*from off*)

Do you think Jack will want some port?

**POPPY**

*I would like some port.*

**RJ**

I enjoy the oxblood colour and consistency of port.

*Doreen reenters with a bottle of port and set of glasses.*



**DOREEN**

As do I.

**ROGER**

The blood in the water looked very much like port.

**POPPY**

Wait, did anyone hear that??

**DOREEN**

I know port is technically a dessert wine.

**POPPY**

Daddy keeps talking about death and blood!

*Doreen sets down the port and glasses.*

**DOREEN**

But I say we make a holiday exception.

**POPPY**

Are we just going to keep pretending that we're not saying the things we're actually saying?

**RJ**

May I have *two* glasses of port, Mother?

**DOREEN**

Of course you may. Now, if there are no objections, I insist that we all cram our mouths with food so they may enjoy a break from talking so much! Poppy, come with me.

**POPPY**

Haven't you been listening? I want to know more about---

**DOREEN**

*Now.*

*She yanks Poppy into the kitchen. Roger and RJ are left alone on the sofa. Moments pass.*

**ROGER**

Well. It appears it's just us men.

*RJ smiles at Roger.*

**ROGER**

It's a bit drafty in here, isn't it? Ah. That blasted window. Your mother must have left it open again.

*He walks to the open window and shuts it.*

**ROGER**

We'll need a fire as well. Do you know how to build a fire, RJ?

**RJ**

I do not.

**ROGER**

Then it's about time you learned. Building a fire is the most important survival tactic when one is out in the wild. It's what got us rescued, you know.

**RJ**

And on the day of our Saviour's birth. A Christmas miracle!

**ROGER**

Yes, good boy. Bully for using terms that are familiar to us. Now take a knee.

*He and RJ kneel at the fireplace.*

**ROGER**

First, you want to set up a base with what we call "tinder." Tinder can be anything, really. Sticks, old newspapers, the bones of small animals. So why don't you fetch...Actually, it appears your mother has already taken care of it. No matter. Next comes the kindling.

You want to stack logs around the tinder in a grid pattern, which your mother seems to have already done as well. Hmmm...

*He thinks, unsure of what's left to do.*

**ROGER**

Why don't you just go fetch me some matches?

*RJ fishes a pack of matches from his pocket and hands them to Roger.*

**RJ**

If we light a fire, will Father Christmas still be able to slither down our chimney?

**ROGER**

We'll snuff it out before bedtime.

**RJ**

And what of Father Gremlin?

**ROGER**

Who?

*He strikes a match.*

**RJ**

Father Gremlin. He is a slimy green man who wears red pyjama pants. And he has a beard made of seaweed. He climbs down the chimney with his sackful of imps, then releases him into the house! I spotted him outside our window earlier. I was not sure who he was at first. But when you explained the inner-workings of Gremlins to us mere minutes ago, I suddenly knew his name. He gave me a shushy. Like this.

*He puts an index finger to his lips.*

**RJ**

“Shhhhhh.” Then he disappeared. But a tingly in my tummy tells me that he will be back. Your match is out.

**ROGER**

Oh.

*He looks down at the match, which has burned down to a nub in his fingers.*

**ROGER**

So it is.

*He throws the dead match into the fireplace and wipes the ashes from his hands.*

**ROGER**

All of this is very...very um...What's the phrase your mother likes to use?

**RJ**

"Compellingly odd."

**ROGER**

Yes! You are compellingly odd, RJ. In fact, I'd say you're the most compellingly odd 12-year-old I know.

**RJ**

I love you, Father.

**ROGER**

I love you, too, son.

*RJ hugs him.*

**RJ**

You also get a kiss!

*He kisses Roger on the cheek.*

**ROGER**

Oh! What a nice surprise.

**RJ**

At school, there are boys who are afraid to hug their fathers in front of the other children, let alone kiss them. But not me.

*He kisses Roger on the cheek again.*

**RJ**

See?

*Again.*

**RJ**

See?

*Again.*

**RJ**

A smooch.

**ROGER**

What a scamp you are!

*Again.*

**ROGER**

All right, I think I've got it, RJ.

*A rustling in the fireplace, as if something's stuck inside the chimney. Ashes fall from the flue. Roger looks up the chimney, then at RJ with worry.*

**RJ**

You've got it, do you?

*Roger nods.*

**RJ**

Are you sure, Father?

*RJ and Roger stare at each other, still locked in their embrace in front of the fireplace.*

*Doreen reenters with Poppy, the two of them carrying a large, covered platter on either side.*

**DOREEN**

Dinner. Is served.

*Roger quickly gets to his feet.*



**ROGER**

Let me help you.

**DOREEN**

Oh, it's fine, my love.

**ROGER**

No, no, I insist.

**DOREEN**

Why don't you fetch the cranberry sauce?

**ROGER**

Right away.

*He exits into the kitchen. Doreen and Poppy carefully set down the platter.*

**DOREEN**

Seats, please.

*RJ sits at the table. Poppy remains standing.*

**DOREEN**

Have a seat next to your brother, Poppy.

*Roger reenters with a bowl of cranberry sauce.*

**POPPY**

Not until he apologizes.

**ROGER**

He'll apologize later.

*He sets down the bowl.*

**ROGER**

Won't you, Arge?

**POPPY**

He should apologize now. If he apologizes later, he won't mean it.

**DOREEN**

Come now, Poppy. It's Christmas. No need to ruin it with apologies.

**RJ**

Yes, no need at all.

**POPPY**

I hate you.

**ROGER**

Poppy!

**POPPY**

Did *that* get your attention?

**DOREEN**

You sit down at once, young lady!

**RJ**

Yes, young lady. Sit down at once!

*Poppy looks toward Roger, pleading.*

**POPPY**

Daddy?

*Roger shakes his head and points for her to sit in her chair. Poppy hangs her head and sits. Roger takes the last seat.*

**DOREEN**

Are we all settled?

**ROGER**

It would appear so.

**DOREEN**

Oh thank goodness.

**ROGER**

Now, then. What have you prepared for our wonderful, funderful Christmas dinner and anniversary feast, Doreen?

**DOREEN**

It's something I've never tried before. I just hope it's cooked all the way through. A drumroll, if you please.

*Roger and RJ drum the table, waiting for Poppy to join in. She sits there, sulking, until Roger makes a funny face at her—maybe sticking out his tongue. She laughs and joins the drumroll.*

**ROGER**

Hooray for Poppy!

*Poppy smiles. With dramatic flair, Doreen lifts the silver cover off of the platter, revealing a roast suckling pig. It drips with juices and is surrounded by garnish. A bright-red apple has been stuffed in its mouth.*

*RJ and Poppy applaud while Roger stares at it in clenched-jawed silence.*

**DOREEN**

Roger?

**ROGER**

It's...

**DOREEN**

Rog, what's wrong? Don't you like it?

*Roger's whole body begins to shake.*

**ROGER**

The... The Beast...

**RJ**

Yes, Father, it is a Beast. A great big ugly Beastie!

**POPPY**

Auntie Beastie!

**RJ (*chanting*)**

Auntie Beastie—

**RJ AND POPPY** (*chanting*)

Auntie Beastie, Auntie Beastie!

**ROGER**

I need...

**RJ AND POPPY** (*chanting*)

Auntie Beastie, Auntie Beastie!

**RJ** (*sing-songy*)

Something wild, something sweet, grab your forks and eat The Beast!

**DOREEN**

Stop it!

**RJ**

But it is a rhyme, Mother.

**DOREEN**

Poppy, get your father some water.

**RJ**

You love a good rhyme.

**ROGER**

No, I-I-I---

**RJ**

So full of whimsy and wordplay.

**DOREEN**

Hurry, Poppy!

**RJ** (*sing-songy*)

Fatten your wineskin with a drink of cool water---

**DOREEN**

Poppy!

**RJ** (*sing-songy*)

---so we may clean ourselves for the Christmas slaughter!

**DOREEN**

Poppy, *NOW*!

**ROGER**

The Beast!

*He swipes plates and silverware from the table, reaching for the pig. With great difficulty, he tries to lift it from the table.*

**DOREEN**

Roger, don't!

*With a surge of strength, Roger roars and lifts the whole platter above his head.*

**DOREEN**

Please! I spent two whole days on it!

*Roger hurls the platter across the room, splatting the pig against the wall. Meat goes everywhere. Everyone stands there in stunned silence. Roger breathes heavily.*

**ROGER**

I'm sorry, everyone.

*He looks around at his family.*

**ROGER**

That is to say, I'm sorry for what I've done. Oh. Oh God!

*He begins retching and dashes offstage into the hallway.*



**DOREEN**

Rog!

*She runs after him, leaving Poppy and RJ by themselves.*

**POPPY**

What...what's wrong with Daddy?

*RJ shrugs.*

**POPPY**

But what do we do?

**RJ**

Let us live in the moment, Sister.

**POPPY**

Clean. Yes. That's what I shall do. I shall clean up!

*She hurriedly picks up the dishes and food from the floor and places them back on the table. In the middle of everything, she notices something on the wall—a stain from where the pig hit it.*

**POPPY**

Oh no.

*She grabs a napkin from the table and runs to the wall. She furiously scrubs the stain.*

**POPPY**

No, no, no, no. It's not coming off!

**RJ**

It is not going to.

**POPPY**

It's so ugly.

**RJ**

Imagine it to be a constellation, Sister.

**POPPY**

What's that?

**RJ**

A group of stars that looks like a picture.

**POPPY**

This doesn't look like anything. It looks like...pig-juice!

**RJ**

Pig-juice is something.

**POPPY**

Does this mean Father Christmas isn't coming?

**RJ**

He may still. Father Christmas is not bound by our family quarrels.

**POPPY**

Oh, I wish Uncle Jack would get here soon.

**RJ**

Patience, Sister. Patience. Uncle Jack-Jack is out there being a bobby on the beat.  
Twirling his big wooden stick and cracking it on the head of South Hackney scum.

**POPPY**

Don't call him Uncle Jack-Jack. He hates it.

**RJ**

A new name, then. How about Uncle...Uncle...Uncle Jackfruit! Yes. Yes. Tonight, I am going to start calling him Uncle Jackfruit.

**POPPY**

What's a jackfruit?

**RJ**

A type of fruit. I came upon one at the grocer the other day with Mother. So big and powerful, yet so spindly and beautiful. It reminded me of Uncle Jack.

**POPPY**

Then I shall call him Uncle Jackfruit, too.

**RJ**

Of course you shall. Now come over here, Sister. I am going to show you something.

*He picks up the pig's head and moves the mouth up and down like a puppet as he speaks.*

**RJ**

"Hullo. I am a pig. Your daddy made me fly. Now anything can happen."

**POPPY**

Stop it.

**RJ**

“Oink-oink, yum-yum.”

**POPPY**

I said stop it! Mummy tells me I shouldn’t do this sort of thing. She says it’s disgusting.

*Pause.*

**POPPY**

I want to try.

*RJ smiles and hands the pig-head to her. She does the same puppeting.*

**POPPY**

“Oink.”

*RJ giggles.*

**POPPY**

“Oink-oink.”

*RJ giggles again.*

**POPPY**

“Oink-oink-oink!”

**RJ**

You cannot just say “oink-oink” over and over.

**POPPY**

I can’t think of anything else to say.

**RJ**

Say what is in your heart.

**POPPY**

“I love my mummy and daddy, oink-oink.”

**RJ**

No. The dark and interesting part of your heart.

*Pause.*

**POPPY**

“Oink-oink, I am invisible and Mummy’s a boring slag and Daddy’s a ripe old crybaby twat and I hate them both.”

*She covers her mouth. Pause.*

**POPPY**

“Oink.”

**RJ**

That is very good, Sister.

**POPPY**

I don't want to play this game anymore.

*She thrusts the pig-head back to RJ.*

**RJ**

We are practicing honesty.

**POPPY**

Sucks to your honesty! I don't want to play!

**RJ**

Your feelings matter little, for we have already ventured to another realm.

*He holds the pig-head in front of his own and puppets the mouth once again.*

**RJ**

“Welcome to the dark and interesting part.”

*They stand there looking at each other—RJ with the head in front of his face, looking like some human-pig hybrid. Everything is quiet. Then...*

**RJ (*imitating a pig*)**

SQUEEEEEEEEEEE!

*Poppy covers her ears. RJ keeps squealing as Doreen enters from the downstairs hallway.*

**DOREEN**

Put down the pig, RJ.

*RJ stops squealing and lowers the pig-head.*

**DOREEN**

Immediately.

**RJ**

The pig is for all of us, Mother.



**DOREEN**

All of you? The pig is for all of you, you say?

**RJ**

‘Tis.

**DOREEN**

*I made that pig. Me. Forty-eight hours I spent slaving away in the kitchen to celebrate your father’s accomplishments, only to have him hurl it against the wall. And why? Why is it that I always have to create the nice thing while the rest of you get the pleasure of destroying it? When is it my turn to destroy?? I won’t see any more harm come to that pig. Not until I’ve gotten a piece. Because I never get a piece. Of anything. Do you hear me?*

*She brandishes a butter knife at Poppy and RJ.*

**DOREEN**

DO YOU HEAR ME???

*The children back away in fright.*

**DOREEN**

PUTITDOWNPUTITDOWNPUTITDOWN!

*She chases the children round and round the table. Once she's caught up to RJ, she swipes at him with the butter knife from behind, just missing him. RJ drops the pig-head and bolts up the stairs and into the hallway. Poppy follows.*

*Doreen leaps on the dropped pig-head and begins devouring its innards from the back of the skull.*

*JACK enters from the front door, dressed in his Metropolitan Police Service uniform: overcoat, custodian helmet, wooden baton attached to his hip. His arms are full of presents.*

*He watches Doreen eat for a little while. She grunts and chews, juice dribbling down her face.*

**JACK**

Dory.

*Doreen immediately stops eating.*

**DOREEN**

Inspector!

**JACK**

Chief Inspector, actually. I've been promoted.

**DOREEN**

Well.

*She stands up and faces Jack.*

**DOREEN**

It would appear that congratulations are in order.

*She awkwardly curtsies with the pig-head still in her hands.*

**DOREEN**

Chief.

*Pause.*

**DOREEN**

It's a shame about Maurice, isn't it? I can't remember if I expressed my condolences to you on the phone or not. Etiquette is most important during times of profound grief.

**JACK**

My grief is not profound. My grief is nonexistent.

*Pause.*

**JACK**

What in the bloody Hell happened here, Dory?

*Doreen turns away from him and puts the pig-head back on the table.*

**JACK**

Dory.

*Pause.*

**JACK**

Doreen.

*Doreen faces him again.*

**JACK**

Where is Roger?

**DOREEN**

Having a soak in the clawfoot. He keeps thrashing about in the water, rambling on and on about "Piggy."

**JACK**

He must have meant the pig. Simple enough.

*He picks up a napkin from the table.*

**JACK**

I'm sure you've had a difficult night. Seeing your husband in...whatever state he might be in.

*He gently dabs grease from Doreen's face.*

**JACK**

But we can't let his behaviour influence our own now, can we? We can't be bandying about like savages. Grunting.

*Dab.*

**JACK**

Nose-diving into pig-roasts.

*Dab.*

**JACK**

Just because Father's misplaced a few of his marbles.

*He dabs the rest of Doreen's face until it's clean.*

**DOREEN**

I must say, that... That feels very nice.

**JACK**

Of course it does. You're clean. It feels good to be clean. We must always remember that, especially during times of great difficulty.

*He tosses the napkin back onto the table.*

**DOREEN**

I'm sorry you had to see me like this.

**JACK**

You have nothing to apologize for. As an officer of the Metropolitan Police Service appointed by Sir Kenneth Newman himself, I solemnly swear to you that I will restore order to this house. Now go into the bathroom. Cast your harpoon. And yank your husband out of the tub—the old whale.

*Doreen laughs.*

**JACK**

And change into something a bit less soiled. A nightgown, perhaps. Before that, however---

*He removes his helmet and baton.*

**JACK**

---would you mind hanging up my accessories?

**DOREEN**

Not at all. Chief.

*She takes Jack's helmet and baton, then hangs them up on the coat rack.*

**JACK**

The coat, too. If it's not too much trouble.

*He removes his overcoat, revealing the rest of his police officer's uniform—navy blue and adorned with insignia along the chest and shoulders.*

**DOREEN**

I must say, you are *highly* decorated.

**JACK**

It's my dedication to the old motto, you see. "Total Policing."

*Doreen hangs up his overcoat.*

**JACK**

Now where are RJ and Poppy? I've brought presents.

**DOREEN**

Upstairs. I might have given them a fright earlier.

**JACK**

No matter. *(calling upstairs)* RJ! Poppy! *(to Doreen)* Go do as I say. Quickly, quickly!

*Doreen disappears into the downstairs hallway. RJ and Poppy come bolting down the stairs. Jack picks up their presents.*

**RJ**

Uncle, Uncle!

**POPPY**

Help us!

**JACK**

That's exactly what I'm here to do. But first, how about a leg-hug for your godfather?

*Poppy and RJ each wrap their arms around one of Jack's legs. RJ steps away and points a finger-gun at Jack.*



**RJ**

All right, you ruffian. You have gotten your leg-hug. Now for your end of the bargain.  
Are those gifts for us?

*Jack holds out the presents.*

**JACK**

Happy Christmas.

*RJ and Poppy run to the tree to open their presents.*

**RJ**

Thank you, Uncle Jackfruit!

**POPPY**

Yes, thank you, Uncle Jackfruit!

**JACK**

You're very welcome, my... What was that now?

**RJ**

We said thank you.

**JACK**

No, what was it you called me?

**RJ**

Uncle Jackfruit!

**JACK**

Your uncle. A fruit.

**RJ**

Yes, Uncle Jackfruit, yes!

**JACK**

Why.

**RJ**

Yes, Sister. Why.

**POPPY**

Me?

**RJ**

Why did you come up with such a silly nickname for our strapping uncle?

**POPPY**

I wasn't the / one who---

**JACK**

Whatever the reason, Poppy, I'm afraid it won't do. While I usually appreciate your colourful, avuncular nicknames for me, I can't have you calling me a jackfruit. A jackfruit is lumpy. Covered in scales. That blasted island was overrun with them. It is a rotten fruit. A reptile fruit. And all of those bumps! It triggers my trypophobia.

**POPPY**

What's tryp...trypo...

**JACK**

Trypophobia. It means a fear of small holes and potentially falling into them. It's a horrifying affliction that I wish on neither of you, my treasured godchildren. So I'll tell you what. We can keep the same initials. But try fortifying it with some iron. Instead of Uncle Jackfruit, you can call me---

**RJ**

Union Jack!

**JACK**

Now *that* is a nickname a man can stand behind. Militaristic. Patriotic. Union Jack it is! You should take a note from your brother, Poppy.

**RJ**

Hooray!

**POPPY**

Hip-hip.

**JACK**

Now. Back to those presents!

*The children continue with their presents. RJ opens a plastic custodian helmet and baton.*

**RJ**

Wacco!

*He puts on the custodian helmet.*

**RJ**

Wizard!

*He swipes the plastic baton through the air.*

**RJ**

Smashing!

*He tucks the plastic baton under his arm.*

**RJ**

Constable Roger James Cockburn, at your service. South Hackney scum, beware! I am the keeper of law and order. Bow before my shiny badge and big wooden stick.

**JACK**

Constable Cockburn---

*He extends his hand.*

**JACK**

---welcome to the force.

*He shakes RJ's hand.*

**RJ**

What case shall we be cracking tonight, Chief?

**JACK**

Believe it or not, a murder.

**RJ**

It cannot be!

**JACK**

Oh, it can. Very close to home, it would seem. But I'm not worried. Not when we have courageous men such as you on the force.

**RJ**

Thank you, Union Jack. A salute.

*He salutes Jack.*

**RJ**

A squeeze.

*He gives Jack another leg-hug.*

**RJ**

And a smooch!

*He plants a loud kiss on Jack's kneecap.*

**JACK**

That's enough, RJ.

*He kicks RJ off of his leg.*

**JACK**

And how about you, Poppy?

**POPPY** (*holding up her present*)

What is it?

**JACK**

It's called a View-Master. Each of those cardboard discs contains a different story. And that little lever there? You flip it and it moves on to the next slide. Go ahead. Try it.

**POPPY**

I see a prissy blonde girl.

*She flips the lever.*

**POPPY**

She looks American.

*Flip.*

**POPPY**

She's ugly.

*Flip.*

**POPPY**

There's a dog with her.

*Flip.*

**POPPY**

A pug.

*Flip.*

**POPPY**

He's ugly, too.

*Flip.*

**POPPY**

An ugly pug.

*Flip.*

**POPPY**

A pugly.

*Flip.*



**POPPY**

They're in a fancy hotel.

*Flip.*

**POPPY**

Now there's a turtle.

*Flip.*

**POPPY**

The girl is writing her name on the mirror.

*Flip.*

**POPPY**

In lipstick.

*Flip.*

**POPPY**

The End.

*She lets the View-Master hang at her side.*

**POPPY** (*deadpan*)

Great story, Union Jack. I'll be upstairs.

*She exits up the stairs and into the hallway. RJ and Jack watch her until she's gone.*

**JACK**

That was...odd.

**RJ**

I found it to be a fine gift, Union Jack.

**JACK**

Thank you.

**RJ**

Especially the part with the pug. Do you know that a pug's eye can pop out just from it playing too hard?

**JACK**

I *did* know that, actually. It's called proptosis.

**RJ**

Fascinating.

**JACK**

Now, Constable, as a new recruit to the force, I must ask you to prove your skills to me as a sleuth.

**RJ**

With pleasure.

**JACK**

Why exactly did your father throw that pig?

**RJ**

If only I knew. He shrieked like an old maid and rambled on and on about “The Beast.” And he said it in a dark and ominous tone that hinted he was spelling it with capital letters!

**JACK**

Did he mention anything else troubling to you? About the island, perhaps?

**RJ**

Not that I can recall. But Mother chased us with the butter knife!

**JACK**

She’s merely worried about your father. It will pass.

**RJ**

What will become of them??

**JACK**

Now listen. Haven't I always taken good care of your family?

**RJ**

Always.

**JACK**

Haven't I always been around in times of need? As your protector, enforcer, and confidant?

**RJ**

Yes!

**JACK**

And haven't I been there for the good times as well? The birthdays, holidays, christenings, and school pageants?

**RJ**

So many pageants!

**JACK**

I am bound to you Cockburns no matter what. Through thick and thin. Drought and deluge. I always have been and I always will be.

**RJ**

Oh yes, Union Jack! Yes!

**JACK**

Your Da and I have been through a lot together. Whatever's going on with old Roger, I'll get to the bottom of it. Mark my words.

**RJ**

They are marked! Oh, thank you, Union Jack!

*He rushes in for another leg-hug, but stops himself. He bows to Jack instead, his forehead nearly touching the floor.*

**RJ**

Thank you.

**JACK**

Now off to bed with you. A man of the law needs his sleep. So that he may enact righteous vengeance on the guilty.

**RJ**

I cannot wait. London is overrun by scoundrels and lunatics and even a Christmas murderer—all of whom are in need of a jolly good pounding. Luckily, Prime Minister Thatcher has appointed Constable Roger James Cockburn, Jr. to the street, the beat, and the case. Aha!

*He snatches his bow, arrows, and quiver from under the Christmas tree.*

**RJ**

My most treasured possessions.

*He runs back up the stairs.*

**RJ**

The thief shall be punished.

*He exits into the hallway. As soon as he's gone, Jack begins snooping around the house.*

*He checks behind the Christmas tree. He looks up the chimney.*

*We hear a scraping noise from above, as if someone's on the roof. Jack dashes to the window, unlocks it, and cranes his neck out into the night.*

*Roger emerges from the hallway, buck naked except for a Santa hat.*

**ROGER**

Merry Merridew.

*Jack turns around.*

**JACK**

Rog.

*Pause.*

**JACK** (*pointing to Roger's hat*)

Why are you---

**ROGER**

Oh. This. With Maurice gone, Doreen wanted me to play Father Christmas. I started putting on the suit, but I couldn't get past the hat.

*Pause.*

**ROGER**

It's a dead man's suit.

*Pause.*

**JACK**

For God's sake, man, your cock's hanging out like a Christmas stocking.

**ROGER**

Oh.

*He looks down at his penis.*

**ROGER**

So it is.

**JACK**

Put on a robe, would you? I can't stand looking at your nasty bits.

**ROGER**

Is that what my bits are to you these days? Nasty?

**JACK**

It would be different if we were down at the rec center. But in your living room?

**ROGER**

My mistake.

*Pause.*



**ROGER**

Henry, Harold, Robert, Bill. And now Maury. Of the old choir gang, it's down to just---

**JACK**

You and me.

*Pause.*

**JACK**

Do put on a bathrobe, Roger. I can't look at you like this.

*Roger nods and exits. Jack shuts the window and locks it. He ventures into the kitchen.*

*While he's gone, something falls from the chimney into the unlit fireplace. It's a small, rectangular box wrapped in emerald-green leaves.*

*Jack reenters. So does Roger, now covered with a robe.*

**ROGER**

I hope this is suitable.

**JACK**

Sit.

*He motions to the den, prompting Roger to sit in one of the armchairs. Jack walks behind Roger and puts his hands on his shoulders.*

**ROGER**

What are you...

**JACK**

Just be quiet.

*He starts rubbing Roger's shoulders.*

**ROGER**

Your fingers are like spiders.

**JACK**

I know.

**ROGER**

A warm bath and a fistful of spider-fingers. It's just what I need on this holiday evening.

*Poppy wanders out of the upstairs hallway wearing a frilly nightgown. She watches Roger and Jack from the landing.*

**ROGER**

Maurice. How exactly did he---

**JACK**

Shhh.

**ROGER**

When did you find out?

**JACK**

Relax, will you? You're all balled up.

**ROGER**

I threw a pig earlier.

**JACK**

I deduced just as much.

*RJ strides out of the hallway with his baton. He sneaks up on Poppy and restrains her.*

**ROGER**

It's got me thinking about that old nursery rhyme. "Chicken, chick. Duck, duckling. Cow, calf. Sow, suckling."

**JACK**

I'm not familiar.

**ROGER**

It's nothing extraordinary. Just another schoolyard song about farm animals and their children.

*Poppy fights back against RJ to no avail.*

**ROGER (bowing his head)**

Yes, that's it. Harder.

*Jack rubs harder. Poppy squirms.*

**ROGER**

Harder.

*Jack obeys. Poppy squirms.*

**ROGER**

This feels right. You plumbing my deepest tissues while I talk about the pig. Piggy.

**JACK**

The pig from the nursery rhyme.

**ROGER**

Piggy from the island.

*Jack stops rubbing Roger's shoulders. Poppy and RJ freeze, both of them suddenly attentive to the adults below.*

**ROGER**

Keep rubbing, if you don't mind. Your hands really are magic.

*Jack starts rubbing Roger's shoulders again, more hesitantly than before.*

**ROGER**

You thought I had forgotten all about him. In a way, I suppose I had. Isn't that what you wanted?

*Poppy and RJ walk back to the railing, peeking through the beams to eavesdrop.*

**JACK**

We were boys. I think we can be forgiven for---

**ROGER**

Murder?

**JACK**

Piggy was an island game gone wrong.

**ROGER**

And Simon?

**JACK**

An accident. It was dark and we were scared. We thought he was---

**ROGER**

The Beast.

**JACK**

Yes.

**ROGER**

A Beast that didn't even exist. Thirty years and you never mentioned any of it.

**JACK**

I'm not in charge of your memory.

**ROGER**

But you wanted to be. You told us that if we squealed, there would be consequences.

*Jack stops rubbing.*

**JACK**

Never.

**ROGER**

You did! In the hull of the warship. While we were singing Christmas carols and sipping cocoa from pewter mugs, tears leaking out of our sunburnt faces. You had us all make a pact. A code of silence that evolved into collective amnesia. It all came rushing back to me when I saw that pig tonight.

**JACK**

Will you listen to yourself? I was 12, Roger. *12*. The same age as RJ. And here you are pegging me for some kind of prepubescent Svengali.

**ROGER**

We were scared of you. The Head Choirboy. The Big Chief. So we all kept quiet until we forgot about it. And you *knew*. You *knew* that's what would happen.

**JACK**

All right, then. I did it. I played the puppet master ever so dutifully. Is that what you want to hear?

**ROGER**

Yes.

**JACK**

This life you have—your C-level celebrity, your moppet children, your bombshell wife, your frosted Christmas cake of a house—*none* of it would be possible if the world knew what really happened on that island. *None* of it would be possible if you had remembered and—God forbid—actually told someone what we did. I did this for you. *All* of you. You and Maurice and Robert and Henry and all the others.

**ROGER**

A fat lot of good it did them.

**JACK**

They lived happy lives.

**ROGER**

They died young.

**JACK**

And how is that my fault? If anything, our code of silence allowed all of you to be celebrated as heroes, then as happy, functioning adults. To gorge yourself on roasts and salaries and obedient partners while I toiled away in my Edward Gorey castle on the dark edge of town. Do you think I've enjoyed being the sole boy—the sole *man*—who was



unable to forget? The man who had to shoulder the burden of *your* crimes for all these years?

*No response.*

**JACK**

Answer me, Roger.

**ROGER**

I...I hadn't thought of it that way.

**JACK**

Of course you haven't. You're too busy throwing pigs and vicious accusations at the only person who's ever looked out for you.

**ROGER**

I...I...

**JACK**

Stop stammering!

**ROGER**

I...I can't help it.

**JACK**

The Roger I knew as a boy never stammered. The Roger I knew was a killer.

**ROGER**

Don't say that.

**JACK**

*Killer.* If there was anyone to be frightened of on that island, it was you. *Killer.*

*Poppy bolts back toward the hallway, having heard enough. RJ tackles her.*

**ROGER**

No...

**JACK**

*Killer.*

*RJ pins Poppy to the ground. Jack grabs his baton.*

**ROGER**

Stop...

**JACK**

*Killer, killer, killer, killer, KILLER.*

*Jack smacks his baton on the armchair in rhythm with his words. Above, RJ smacks Poppy in the side several times with his baton. She cries out, her wails covered by Jack's taunts.*

**JACK**

Show me who you really are! *Killer!*

**ROGER**

I can't!

**JACK**

Admit it. You *liked* dashing Piggy's brains all across those oceanside rocks.

**ROGER**

I did.

**JACK**

You *liked* tearing Simon to bits and watching the ocean carry him away.

**ROGER**

Oh God, I did.

**JACK**

And the stick.

**ROGER**

What stick??

**JACK**

The *stick*. Sharpened at both ends. What did you want to do with that stick, Roger?

**ROGER**

I can't remember.

**JACK**

Oh, but I think you can.

**ROGER**

Don't make me.

**JACK**

What was his name?

**ROGER**

I don't know!

**JACK**

Say it.

**ROGER**

Jack, please!

*Poppy cries out again. RJ covers her mouth.*

**JACK**

Say it!

**ROGER**

No!

**JACK**

Say it, Roger! Say the name of the final boy you wanted to *kill*!

**ROGER**

Ralph!

*He covers his mouth, as if he's just said something dirty. A beat. He removes his hand.*

**ROGER**

His name was Ralph.

**JACK**

That's right. Ralph. What did you want to do to our dear friend Ralph?

**ROGER**

We had killed a sow. Shoved my stick up its arse. After Ralph ran off, I...I...

*He clears his throat.*

**ROGER**

I wanted to do the same to him.

*Doreen comes out of the downstairs hallway, now wearing a high-collared nightgown.*

**DOREEN**

Jack.

*RJ runs back into the hallway, leaving Poppy stranded. Doreen faces the stairs, alerted by the noise.*

**DOREEN**

Poppy!

**POPPY**

Why is everything so sad? It's Christmas.

*Jack moves to the foot of the stairs.*

**JACK**

Go back to bed, Poppy.

*Poppy doesn't move.*

**JACK**

Father Christmas only comes if you're asleep.

**DOREEN**

Listen to your uncle.

*Poppy doesn't move.*

**JACK**

Roger?

**ROGER**

Poppy, be a good girl and---

**POPPY**

What if I told you that you all hurt me? What if I told you that none of you ever listen to me or pay attention to me and it hurts?

**ROGER**

I...

*He looks to Jack.*

**ROGER**

I...

*He looks back up at Poppy.*

**ROGER**

Then I'd tell you to go to bed.

**POPPY**

Please.

*Roger doesn't respond.*

**POPPY**

All right, then.

*She goes back into the upstairs hallway.*



**DOREEN**

I'll go tuck them in.

*She ascends the stairs and disappears into the hallway.*

**ROGER**

I'm a monster.

**JACK**

And a husband. And a father.

**ROGER**

After what Poppy just heard, I'm not so sure.

**JACK**

Tell her that, at the time, you did what you thought was right.

**ROGER**

But I didn't.

**JACK**

Tell her it was a matter of good and evil. That on the island, there was a fat piggy boy and a skinny boy who were both our enemies. Our tormentors. That retaliation was the only option.

**ROGER**

Yes. Yes, that's good...

**JACK**

Tell her that the bad, fat little boy is long dead, but the skinny boy isn't. Tell her that the skinny boy has grown up, smeared himself with warpaint, and picked off almost every last one of your friends. Tell her that if it wasn't for dear Uncle Jack, you'd likely be next.

**ROGER**

Do you mean to say... You don't think---

**JACK**

I don't think. I *know*. Ralph was most recently spotted in Whitechapel. I'll head there tonight for my patrol.

**ROGER**

Does the rest of the Department know?

**JACK**

I've had to handle this one by myself. For obvious reasons.

*Roger grabs his overcoat from the coat rack.*

**JACK**

Where are you going?

**ROGER**

Whitechapel. That's what you said, right?

**JACK**

Don't be ridiculous.

**ROGER**

We'll find him. Together. Big Chief and his trusty enforcer.

*He throws on his overcoat.*

**ROGER**

We'll finish what we started.

**JACK**

You know I can't let you do that.

**ROGER**

And why the hell not?

**JACK**

It's a big-enough mess as it is. I'm handling it.

**ROGER**

And doing a shit job from the looks of it.

**JACK**

I've been tracking him nightly from here to Watford and back. It takes time.

**ROGER**

We don't have time!

**JACK**

You need to trust me. You stopped trusting me tonight, and what did it get you? A mouthy daughter and a wall soaked in pig grease. So stay inside and keep your windows and doors locked at all times. Heed my orders.

**ROGER**

Sucks to your orders.

*He walks to the door.*

**JACK**

Don't you dare walk out that door, Roger.

*Roger opens the door.*

**ROGER**

It's a beautiful night for a pig hunt.

*Jack runs at him and pulls Roger back into the living room. They fall to the floor and roll around. Doreen enters from the upstairs hallway and watches them. Roger elbows Jack in the stomach and gets back to his feet. Jack's baton rolls across the floor.*

**JACK**

Roger, stop! I command it!

*Roger bolts to the front door. Doreen runs down the stairs and slams the door.*

**DOREEN**

Roger, stay!

**ROGER**

I have to find him!

**DOREEN**

Find who??

*Jack's voice changes. It's frightened—more youthful.*

**JACK**

“ME.”

*Roger turns away from the door and faces Jack.*

**JACK**

“Isn’t that right, Roger?”

*No response.*

**JACK**

I said “Isn’t that right?”

*Roger smiles. His voice becomes younger as well.*

**ROGER**

“Hullo, Ralph.”

**JACK**

“You’re a beast!”

*Roger moves to the table.*

**JACK**

“You’re a beast and a swine and a bloody, bloody thief!”

**ROGER**

“You couldn’t stop me coming if I wanted.”

*He dips his hand in the bowl of cranberry sauce and smears it on his face like warpaint.*

*He beckons Doreen to join him.*

**ROGER**

“You.”

*Doreen looks to Jack. He nods. Doreen walks to Roger. Roger dips his hand in the bowl of cranberry sauce and smears it on her face.*

**ROGER**

“For hunting. Dazzle paint.”

**DOREEN**

Oh, Rog...

*Roger begins chanting, enticing Doreen to join in.*

**ROGER** (*chanting*)

“Kill The Beast...Cut its throat...Spill its blood...”

**DOREEN** (*joining in*)

“Cut its throat...”

*She grabs a butter knife from the table and hands one to Roger as well. RJ enters from upstairs. He watches the adults from the landing.*

**DOREEN AND ROGER** (*chanting*)

“Kill The Beast! Cut its throat! Spill its blood!

*He and Doreen stalk Jack around the room. Doreen laughs and stays playful, while Roger seems more intense and deliberate. Jack throws the coat rack at them. Roger retreats back to the table.*

**DOREEN AND ROGER** (*chanting*)

“KILL THE BEAST! CUT HIS THROAT! SPILL HIS BLOOD! KILL THE BEAST!  
CUT HIS THROAT! SPILL HIS BLOOD!”

*In one ferocious motion, Roger rips the pig's face off of its skull.*

**DOREEN**

This is quite fun!



**DOREEN AND ROGER** (*chanting*)

“KILL THE BEAST! CUT HIS THROAT! SPILL HIS BLOOD!”

*Roger leaps on Jack.*

**ROGER** (*chanting*)

“BASH HIM IN! DO HIM IN! BASH HIM IN! DO HIM IN!”

**DOREEN**

Yes, bash him in!

*Roger yanks the pig-face tightly over Jack's own, like a mask.*

**DOREEN** (*chanting*)

“Bash him in! Bash him in!”

*Roger grabs Jack's baton and throws it to Doreen.*

**ROGER** (*chanting*)

“BASH HIM IN! BASH HIM IN!”

*Doreen just stares at the baton.*

**ROGER**

“Do it!”

**DOREEN**

Um...

**ROGER**

“You’re in the tribe now. BASH HIM IN! DO HIM IN! BASH HIM IN!”

**JACK**

“BASH ME IN!”

*Roger punches Jack in the side.*

**ROGER**

“Quiet, pig!”

*Jack snorts and squeals.*

**ROGER**

“BASH HIM IN! DO HIM IN!”

**DOREEN**

No.

**ROGER**

“BASH HIM IN! BASH HIM IN!”

**DOREEN**

I said no!

*Jack snorts and squeals.*

**ROGER**

“BASH HIM IN! BASH HIM IN!”

*Doreen throws the baton on the floor*

**DOREEN**

NO.

*She exits up the stairs and into the hallway. The men scramble for the baton, fighting over it. Roger gets the upper hand and strikes Ralph once more in the side. They wrestle.*

*Roger kisses Jack. Jack recoils for a moment, then kisses him back.*

*They kiss and wrestle, kiss and wrestle, kiss and wrestle. Jack gets to his feet. He bends himself over the table, unbuckles his belt, and pulls his pants and underwear down around his ankles.*

**JACK**

Do it.

*Roger goes behind Jack and lifts up his robe. He grabs a hunk of pig meat from the table and uses it to grease up Jack, then himself. He enters Jack and begins thrusting. Roger thrusts until he climaxes.*

*As Roger finishes, he cries out with an incredible release. He pulls out of Jack and falls to the floor, exhausted. RJ looks toward the upstairs hallway and exits.*

*Jack hikes up his pants. He removes the pig-mask, walks to the coat rack, and stands it upright. Roger follows his lead and exits into the kitchen, then reenters with a rubbish bin.*

*Together, the men neatly deposit all of the pig parts inside and clear away the dishes. Roger takes the rubbish bin back into the kitchen and returns.*

**ROGER**

I suppose that's it, then.

*Jack nods. Roger embraces him. After a few moments of silence, Jack returns the embrace. They stand like that, locked in each other's arms.*

**JACK**

I expect not a single word, of course.

**ROGER**

Not even between us?

*Jack sharply breaks their embrace.*

**JACK**

*Especially* not between us.

*Roger looks at the floor.*

**JACK**

Treat this like the island. Because it is the island. Is that clear?

*No response.*

**JACK**

Answer me, Roger. Is. That. Clear.

*Pause. Roger looks back up.*

**ROGER**

Crystal.

**JACK**

Good. Tell Doreen the same. For now, lock the windows and doors. Then go clean yourself up. I don't just mean washing your face for a tick, either, but an honest-to-God shower. Afterward, throw on the festive red suit and put out the presents. Be sure to get a good night's rest. You will wake up to enjoy the holiday with your family.

*He puts on his overcoat and reattaches his baton to his hip.*

**JACK**

Happy Christmas, old friend.

**ROGER**

Happy Christmas.

*He checks that the window's locked and gives Jack a utilitarian salute. He exits into the downstairs hallway. Jack takes his custodian helmet from the coat rack. He looks around the house, admiring its newly clean state.*

**JACK**

Total Policing.

*He flips his custodian helmet once in his hands and places it on his head. We hear water running downstairs and Roger humming “Good King Wenceslas.” Jack smiles at the sound.*

**JACK**

Total Policing, if I do say so myself.

*He exits out the front door, locking it behind him.*

**ROGER** (*singing offstage*)

“Good King Wenceslas looked out

On the feast of Stephen.

When the snow lay round about,

Deep and crisp and even.

Brightly shone the moon that night,

Though the frost was cru-el.

When a poor man came in sight,

Gath’ring winter fu-u-el.”

*Outside, a thin, dirty hand reaches up and flattens against the window. It slides back down out of sight, leaving a streak of blood and dirt on the glass.*

**ROGER** (*singing offstage*)

“Hither, page, and stand by me, if thou know’st it, telling,  
Yonder peasant, who is he? Where and what his dwelling?”

*Poppy tiptoes out of the hallway and descends the stairs, holding the View-Master at her side.*

**ROGER** (*singing offstage*)

“Sire, he lives a good league hence, underneath the mountain;  
Right against the forest fence, by Saint Agnes’ fountain.”

*Roger hums. Poppy examines the streak of blood and dirt on the window.*

**ROGER** (*singing offstage*)

“Bring me flesh and bring me wine.  
Bring me pine logs hither.  
Thou and I will see him dine,  
When we bear him thither.”

*Poppy unlocks the window and opens it.*

**ROGER** (*singing offstage*)

“Page and monarch, forth they went,  
Forth they went together...”



*Roger hums. Poppy peeks her head outside.*

**POPPY**

Hullo?

*RJ emerges from the upstairs hallway. Roger continues humming.*

**POPPY**

Father Christmas?

**RJ**

Father Gremlin, Sister.

*Poppy turns around to face him. Offstage, the water stops running.*

**RJ**

Come back to bed so he may deliver our gifts.

**POPPY**

You're not getting any gifts, RJ. You've been bad.

**RJ**

Father Gremlin pays no mind.

*A staredown. Neither of them move. RJ smacks the baton in his open palm a few times.*

**RJ**

Come now, Sister. For I have seen what adults do in the wild.

**POPPY**

In a moment.

*RJ lingers, then exits back into the upstairs hallway. Poppy shuts the window, leaving it unlocked. She brings the View-Master to her face and flips the lever a few times.*

**ROGER (singing offstage)**

“Sire, the night is darker now

And the wind blows stronger.

Fails my heart, I know not how,

I can go no longer.”

*Poppy walks to the fireplace.*

**ROGER (singing offstage)**

“Mark my footsteps, good my page.

Tread thou in them boldly.”

*Poppy tosses the View-Master into the fireplace.*

**ROGER** (*singing offstage*)

“Thou shalt find the winter’s rage  
Freeze thy blood less coldly.”

*Roger hums. Poppy notices the object wrapped in leaves. She kneels down and unwraps the leaves to reveal a rectangular gold box. She takes the lid off the box and stares at what’s inside.*

*She slowly takes out a large Bowie knife.*

*It’s rusty, the handle wrapped in twine. It’s clearly been used. Poppy turns it over in her hands, fascinated.*

*We hear Roger approaching and humming from offstage. Poppy quickly throws the leaves into the fire and places the knife back into the box. She covers it with the lid, holding the box in her hands. Roger’s voice gets closer.*

**ROGER** (*singing offstage*)

“In his master’s steps he trod,  
Where the snow lay dinted...”

*Roger enters, now clad in full Father Christmas regalia. He has a sack of presents slung over his shoulder. He stops in his tracks when he sees his daughter. They stare at each other in silence.*

**ROGER**

Hullo, Poppy.

*Pause.*

**ROGER**

Are you disappointed?

**POPPY**

I think I already knew.

**ROGER**

You did?

**POPPY**

I think I've always known.

**ROGER**

Have a sit in the grown-up's chair.

*He sits in his armchair. Poppy sits across from him and places the golden box in her lap.*

**POPPY**

There is no Father Christmas.

**ROGER**

No. I'm sad to say that there isn't.

**POPPY**

There is no Father Christmas and you killed someone.

*Pause.*

**ROGER**

Yes.

**POPPY**

On the island?

**ROGER**

When I was a little boy.

**POPPY**

Was he a little boy, too?

**ROGER**

Yes.

**POPPY**

How old?

**ROGER**

12. We were both 12.

**POPPY**

And you did it with a...a...

**ROGER**

A boulder.

**POPPY**

Why?

**ROGER**

I had to.

**POPPY**

But isn't killing wrong?

**ROGER**

Sometimes. But sometimes it simply...happens. You see, Poppy, when human beings are young—once again, keep in mind, we were only 12—they tend to see things in black and

white. Good versus bad. And in my world, Piggy and another boy named Ralph had wronged me. I was good while they were... Well, they were evil.

**POPPY**

Were they *actually* evil?

**ROGER**

The more I think about it, they were. I truly believe they were.

**POPPY**

How do you know?

**ROGER**

Because it felt good killing Piggy. And if he wasn't evil, then it wouldn't have felt good.

**POPPY**

And Ralph?

**ROGER**

Well, Ralph is still alive. And from what your Uncle Jack has told me, he's been doing some very, very nasty things. Far nastier than anything I've ever done. And like I said, he was a threat to us. Ralph is *still* a threat to us. And if you feel threatened by someone—anyone—you must make sure that threat doesn't end in harm coming to you. Does that make sense?

**POPPY**

Very much so.

**ROGER**

We should talk more about this. And we will. But for tonight, I'm spent. I'm sure you are, too.

**POPPY**

Yes.

**ROGER**

Then off to bed with you.

*He kneels down to kiss her cheek and sees the golden box in her lap.*

**ROGER**

What's this?

**POPPY**

A present.

**ROGER**

Then it belongs under the tree.



**POPPY**

It's for RJ.

**ROGER**

Don't you want to give it to him in the morning?

**POPPY**

I'd like to give it to him now.

**ROGER**

Did you make it in school?

**POPPY**

I'd rather not reveal any more.

**ROGER**

Very well. You're growing into quite the secretive young lady, Penelope Cockburn. Now go give your brother his present. Before he's off waltzing with the sugarplums.

**POPPY**

Of course. Goodnight, Father.

**ROGER**

Goodnight, Daughter.

*Poppy exits up the stairs and into the hallway. Roger places the presents under the tree. Afterward, he goes to the fireplace. He picks up the View-Master and looks at it with mild confusion. He shrugs and sets it next to the fireplace.*

*Roger reignites the flames. He steps back and admires his handiwork.*

## **ROGER**

May I dream of waves crashing and unbroken conch shells.

*He sits back down in his armchair, exhausted, and drifts to sleep.*

*Snow starts falling outside. Softly. The sound of boys playing fills the space. Voices shout at each other, water splashes, sticks crack together. At some point, there might be choral music.*

*During the soundscape, Doreen enters from the upstairs hallway, wearing a heavy coat and carrying a carpet bag. She descends the stairs. She looks at Roger sleeping, looks toward the upstairs hallway, and walks out the front door.*

*We hear the sound of insects around a campfire, followed by a soothing bellow from a conch shell. Roger smiles. We hear waves breaking gently on a distant shore.*

*The sounds fade as Poppy emerges from the upstairs hallway, still holding the knife, which is now soaked with blood. So is her nightgown. She has the bow slung over one shoulder and the quiver with arrows strapped to her back.*

*She descends the stairs and gazes into the fire. We see the thin, dirty hand plaster itself against the window once again. RALPH hoists himself up and perches on the windowsill outside.*

*He's the same age as Roger and Jack, but much gaunter and with a scraggly beard. He wears no shirt or shoes—only tattered red pajama pants. His body is streaked with blood and warpaint. Something long is bound to his back with a rawhide strap.*

*He opens the window, remaining perched on the outside windowsill for a few moments. Finally, he steps inside and unfastens the object from his back.*

*It's a stick. Sharpened at both ends.*

*He stands behind Roger, with Poppy in front. They stare at each other. Same look on their face. Same blood and grime on their bodies.*

*Roger stirs. Poppy takes a step toward him, as if she's going to wake him up. But Ralph puts up his hand, signaling for her to stop walking. She does. Ralph puts an index finger to his lips.*

**RALPH**

Shhhhhh.

*Pause.*

*Poppy thinks.*

*She puts an index finger to her lips, too.*

**POPPY**

Shhhhhh.

*Poppy and Ralph smile. The snow falls through the open window. Roger continues to sleep.*

*Blackout.*

*END OF PLAY.*

## **THE AMPHIBIANS**

By Dan Caffrey

## CHARACTERS

**SIMONE:** A 17-year-old girl.

**BRYN:** Same.

## TIME

Thirteen years from now. Shortly after the beginning of the school year, over the course of three or so weeks. The characters' clothing, phones, and belongings might look slightly more futuristic than what high-schoolers would have had when this play was written (2019), but maybe not.

## PLACE

The woods of Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park (Starkey Park or just Starkey for short), a wilderness reserve in New Port Richey, Florida. New Port Richey is a suburb of Tampa, and, like any stretch of wilderness in Florida, there's plenty of interesting wildlife and terrain: pine trees and sugar sand and wild boars and armadillos and the occasional Florida panther. But it's not important that we see any of these physical details represented onstage. We can if budget and a well thought-out vision allows. But the only thing that we absolutely *need* to see are the two central characters, their belongings, and what they eventually encounter in the woods.

## **TEMPO/PUNCTUATION**

For the most part, Simone and Bryn talk FAST. The play shouldn't run longer than eighty or ninety minutes. An ellipsis (...) indicates a deliberately unfinished, stalled, or evaporated line of dialogue. Three dashes (---) indicate interrupted dialogue, or dialogue that continues after a stage direction or line from another character. A slash (/) indicates dialogue that is interrupted by another character, but overlaps with the next line.

**ONE.**

*SIMONE leads BRYN through the woods. Bryn has her phone out, immersed in a state of half-texting/half-listening.*

**SIMONE**

No, it's like, I have sympathy for her *situation*. I'm just saying it shouldn't be called SIDS.

**BRYN**

Why.

**SIMONE**

Cuz it sounds all fun and playful! I feel that way about most diseases. Shingles and chickenpox and---

**BRYN**

Rickets.

**SIMONE**

Oh fuck yeah, rickets! Rickets sounds like an old-timey sport where everyone rides giant peacocks and tries to scoop up a hedgehog with jai alai shovels. *(British accent)* “‘Ello, gov’na. Fancy a game of Rickets? And moight I suggest polishing it off with a cuppa SIDS?”



**BRYN**

“Cuppa.” Heh.

**SIMONE**

Heh. I wish I was British. Wait, no I don’t.

*A text alert from Bryn’s phone. It’s a clipped sample from the Kesha song “Godzilla,” a deep cut that, at this point, is over fifteen years old. Bryn answers the text.*

**SIMONE**

Let’s see—what else, what else...rickets and shingles and chickenpox and whooping cough and...What else?? Bryn. Hellooo?

**BRYN**

Shingles.

*“Godzilla.”*

**SIMONE**

I just said that one.

**BRYN**

Croup.

*“Godzilla.”*

**SIMONE**

Why don’t you put away your phone.

**BRYN**

I can do both things.

**SIMONE**

Um, clearly you can’t.

*“Godzilla.”*

**SIMONE**

The hell is that ring tone?

**BRYN**

Kesha.

*“Godzilla.”*

**SIMONE**

And who the fuck are you even texting?

**BRYN**

Cheer squad.

*“Godzilla.”*

**BRYN**

Group thread.

*Simone snatches away the phone.*

**BRYN**

Hey!

**SIMONE**

This is the first time we’ve hung out in...I can’t even remember.

**BRYN**

We were at Beef O’Brady’s like two nights ago!

**SIMONE**

Yeah, with like thirty other people. Thirty other *cheerleaders*. I know you just joined the team and everything, but when was the last time it was just you and me? Out here, exploring the vast wilderness of Starkey Park.

**BRYN**

Ummm...

**SIMONE**

Exactly. As a matter of fact...

*She puts both of their phones in the knothole of a tree.*

**BRYN**

Simone!

**SIMONE**

We'll get em on the way out.

**BRYN**

I'm not leaving my phone in some gross treehole!

*She goes to retrieve her phone. Simone slaps away her arm.*

**BRYN**

Ow!

**SIMONE**

Do you trust me?

**BRYN**

Not right now I don't!

**SIMONE**

Well that really hurts my feelings. Cuz the thing I'm taking you to is...Fuck, I'm getting all excited about it. Like I am *seriously* getting the heebie-jeebies. When do I ever say old-person words like "heebie-jeebies"? When I'm excited. That's when. There can be no pictures. No texts or Insta or WolfBay or Star-Nose. Cuz if word got out about what I'm about to unveil, we could be in serious trouble. So no. Fucking. Phones.

**BRYN**

What if someone steals em?

**SIMONE**

No one comes out here anymore.

**BRYN**

We're here.

**SIMONE**

Yeah, but we've always hung out here. I mean, you not so much lately...

**BRYN**

I told you, I've been busy. Practice and pep rallies and---

**SIMONE**

You've got other things going on. I'm not mad. Do I look mad? Cuz I'm not. But it still proves my point. Everyone thinks Starkey Park has gotten too dangerous. Shit, until a couple years ago, my mom would've *never* let me come this far in by myself. But then she stopped giving a shit, just like all the other adults. And she's the Park Site *Supervisor*.

**BRYN**

It is pretty overgrown.

**SIMONE**

Overgrown, muddy trails, probably a brushfire someplace. Her job is literally to take care of the land and she's stopped doing it. It's why I came out here the other day. To see if she'd even notice. That's when I found... Well. You'll see.

**BRYN**

Can't you just tell me already? I've got homework.

**SIMONE**

Practice, homework, practice, homework, practice, homework. The woeful life of a cheerleader! What is it tonight?

**BRYN**

Sea-level monitoring.

**SIMONE**

That shit takes like two minutes!

**BRYN**

Not for me.

**SIMONE**

It literally involves going to a website and writing down some numbers. I'll bet you Ms. Sutter doesn't even check it.

**BRYN**

Yeah, but when I do it, I get freaked out or...numb? There's all those blurry green numbers and the saline concentration and images of barnacles getting higher on the seawall and I can't handle it and I end up playing *Bubble Tea Barista* for three hours.

**SIMONE**

Ooo, that's a good game.

**BRYN**

It is.

**SIMONE**

But if your night's just gonna consist of stirring imaginary tapioca pearls, then you've got *plenty* of time to see this cool-ass thing I'm about to show you. So stop being such a mopey little bitch.

**BRYN**

*Simone!*

**SIMONE**

What??

**BRYN**

We promised never to call each other that.

**SIMONE**

It's just a word.

**BRYN**

We *promised*. If I can't have my phone or do my homework, then you can't say...what you just said.

**SIMONE**

Okay, okay, okay! I take it back. Now let's go.



**BRYN**

Fine.

*Simone starts walking again.*

**BRYN**

But only cuz I have no idea where I am right now!

*She follows Simone.*

**SIMONE**

See how nice this is? Just you and me and nature. Like old times.

**BRYN**

Yeah.

**SIMONE**

What's another fun-sounding disease?

**BRYN**

I dunno.

**SIMONE**

Come on, think!

**BRYN**

Ummm...toxoplasmosis.

**SIMONE**

Fuck yeah, toxi... Wait. The fuck is... What'd you just---

**BRYN**

Toxo. Plas. Mosis.

**SIMONE**

Is that like FAIDS?

**BRYN**

Parasites.

**SIMONE**

Toxoplasmosis. Sounds like---

**BRYN**

A Kesha song.

**SIMONE**

Ugh, you and your Kesha songs. She's all you ever talk about!

**BRYN**

She's had a tough life.

**SIMONE**

Kesha is doing juuust fine.

**BRYN**

Performing at state fairs is not "fine."

**SIMONE**

She still gets to play music for a living.

**BRYN**

Yeah, at the redneck Strawberry Festival.

**SIMONE**

Plant City?

**BRYN**

Dade.

**SIMONE**

How the fuck does this fucking state have two fucking Strawberry Festivals?

**BRYN**

Cuz it's Florida.

**SIMONE**

Yeah, but like, even by Florida standards, that's weird.

**BRYN**

Having two strawberry festivals is probably the *least*-weird thing about Florida.

**SIMONE**

No, no, no, will you hear me out. We don't even have an Orange Festival. Or a Citrus Festival.

**BRYN**

Oranges aren't special anymore. It's so hot, you can grow em anywhere.

**SIMONE**

No, I know, but it's still the fruit or fruit group or whatever that Florida is actually *known* for. Who even comes here for strawberries?

**BRYN**

Kesha.

**SIMONE**

Apparently.

**BRYN**

When my mom was 17, she got to see her at Amalie Arena with like twenty-thousand other people. I had to see her in Dade City next to the funnel-cake stand.

**SIMONE**

So? I'd still be creaming my jeans if I was Kesha. She gets to hang out with carnies. Live off fried Oreos and gator tail. Play her old-ass music for money.

**BRYN**

You used to *love* old music. All those punk records your mom has. PUP and Bully and Diarrhea Planet...

**SIMONE**

Yeah, but now I'm all about the *now*, you know? The pop music being made in the *moment*. It's a big middle finger to all those crotchety Millennials. So fuck PUP. Fuck Diarrhea Planet. Gimme Orange Flex and Trev County and Bubba Neuwirth...

**BRYN**

You really think anyone's gonna be talking about Bubba Neuwirth in twenty years?

**SIMONE**

No one's gonna be talking about *anything* in twenty years. Or ten years or five years or next year or maybe even next *week* or...Jesus, what now???

**BRYN**

You shouldn't joke like that.

**SIMONE**

What is *with* you today? You get pissy about your phone, you get pissy about homework, and now you get pissy about my jokes. The thing I'm taking you to...it's *very* special. You should feel *honored*.

**BRYN**

It's hard to feel honored when you call me *that* word and make jokes about the world ending.

**SIMONE**

Even if the seawall fails and the water comes tomorrow, we still got seventeen years outta this life. Seventeen years! That's longer than most dogs.

**BRYN**

Um, I think it's okay to wanna outlive a dog? Like, I think that's a perfectly reasonable / goal in life.

**SIMONE**

What makes you so special?

**BRYN**

Simone, only getting to live til 17 is a seriously depressing thought! Starkey could be flooded sooner than we think. All of New Port *Richey* could be flooded sooner than we think.

**SIMONE**

New Port Bitchey. Heh.

**BRYN**

I'm serious.

**SIMONE**

*Heh.*

**BRYN**

Everything's happening like ten years before they said it would.

**SIMONE**

I swear, *one* little island nation gets washed away---

**BRYN**

Half a million people got displaced!

**SIMONE**

I know, but like, I don't need to hear about it all the time!

**BRYN**

What about Miami? Do you not wanna hear about that, either? How it's uninhabitable?  
How they're averaging one Category 3 hurricane a *month*?

**SIMONE**

Um, how about it's Hurricane Season?

**BRYN**

Um, how about it's kinda hard to have a Hurricane Season when there's *always a hurricane*.

**SIMONE**

The fuck are we supposed to do about it? I just wanna enjoy normal high-school stuff.

**BRYN**

At least we agree on that. Why do you think I joined the cheer team?



**SIMONE**

Um, cuz they finally *let* you?

**BRYN**

Hey...

**SIMONE**

Only took you three years.

**BRYN**

Everyone's really nice. Libby Sopchick's even into old video games.

**SIMONE**

Cooooool. How's Coach DeGenarro?

**BRYN**

She's a hardass. But in a good way.

**SIMONE**

Hell, I'd be a hardass, too, if Ms. Sutter was my wife.

**BRYN**

*Ex*-wife. Coach Deej left her.

**SIMONE**

Wait, for real?

**BRYN**

That's what I was trying to tell you earlier. What they had to go through...most couples can't survive something like that.

**SIMONE**

Maybe. But it's also like, can you really even blame Coach?

**BRYN**

Jesus Christ, Simone.

**SIMONE**

I mean yes, of course it sucks that they got divorced and all that, but...Picture it: Ms. Sutter—pre-dead-baby Ms. Sutter—shuffling around the house. Eyes glazed over, banana tits hanging outta her bathrobe while she drones on and on about heat waves and droughts and rising sea levels. I'm surprised Coach DeeJ didn't leave her earlier.

*She laughs to herself.*

**BRYN**

What?

**SIMONE**

I just...I thought of something.

**BRYN**

Okay.

**SIMONE**

You wouldn't like it.

**BRYN**

Say it or don't say it. I don't really care.

**SIMONE**

Well...Was their baby named Sidney?

**BRYN**

I dunno.

**SIMONE**

Cuz if it was, that'd be *really* fucked up. Your kid's name is Sid...and it dies of...SIDS?

**BRYN**

That's...That's like one of the worst things you've ever said.

**SIMONE**

Oh come on. I feel bad for her. I do! But it's like, why even have a baby at all? Especially at her age. Ol Ms. *Slutter* knows that better than anyone. She said the birthrate's down like forty-five percent these past two years cuz everyone's so bummed out.

**BRYN**

Maybe she wanted something to live for. Think about it. You're Ms. Sutter---

**SIMONE**

Barf.

**BRYN**

You're Ms. Sutter and you feel so sad and hopeless cuz all your friends feel so sad and hopeless cuz the entire *world* feels so sad and hopeless. But you still wanna bring a new life to this Earth. Despite all the floods and famines and unbreathable atmosphere and whatever else might happen in your baby's lifetime, you still wanna love it / and give it a home.

**SIMONE**

Okay, okay, can we pleeease stop talking about Ms. Sutter's dead baby? Shit's bumming me out.

**BRYN**

You brought it up.

**SIMONE**

I know, but it's not like I get off on it.

**BRYN**

I never said you did.

**SIMONE**

But you *thought* it.

**BRYN**

You love making fun of people.

**SIMONE**

Why does everyone always think that?

**BRYN**

Um, cuz you do it all the time and talk about how much you love it?

**SIMONE**

It just comes outta me. I'll go off on someone and it's like this motor in my chest and it feels so good until it doesn't and then it's this weird mixture of feeling all worked up but really hating myself. I'm a nice person.

**BRYN**

I know.

**SIMONE**

I'm a *nice* person, Bryn.

**BRYN**

I said I know!

**SIMONE**

Good.

**BRYN**

I don't know if the *world* knows.

**SIMONE**

The fuck's that supposed to mean?

**BRYN**

Like, I know you really well, so I know that at your core, you're nice. Nice enough anyway.

**SIMONE**

Wow. Thanks.

**BRYN**

On a fundamental level, is what I mean. Like, in a crisis situation, you would do the right thing. But most people wouldn't know that about you.

**SIMONE**

Cuz of how I talk?

**BRYN**

Talk, act, think. Yeah.

**SIMONE**

I just say horrible shit sometimes. I don't mean it. You think I actually mean the horrible shit I say?

**BRYN**

I dunno. Maybe? Maybe a small part. And that's okay. I guess.

**SIMONE**

I know it's okay! I don't need you to tell me that. I know who I am. Fuck! Oh shit, we're here.

**BRYN**

Thank God.

*They stop walking. Simone takes out a bandana from her back pocket.*

**BRYN**

What're you---

*Simone ties the bandana around Bryn's eyes, blindfolding her.*

**BRYN**

Simone!

**SIMONE**

Breathe in.

**BRYN**

Why are you being so weird??

**SIMONE**

It's for dramatic effect.

*Bryn slides the bandana off her face.*

**BRYN**

I'm going home.



*Simone gently grabs her by the shoulders, holding her in place.*

**SIMONE**

This is the last thing. Okay? If you hate it or aren't impressed by it or whatever, you can leave. For real. But first, just swear to me that you'll breathe in deep. Swear to me that you'll breathe deep and follow. I'll do it, too.

*She holds her breath.*

*Bryn considers.*

*After a moment, she slides the bandana back onto her eyes and holds her breath, too.*

*Simone holds out her hand. Bryn grabs it. Simone guides her into the clearing.*

*Everything goes quiet. It feels like another dimension. The girls live in it for a few beats.*

*Finally, Simone removes Bryn's blindfold.*

*As if on cue, a ROAR bellows throughout the space, revealing a CREATURE lying in the middle of the clearing. We see it at the same moment Bryn does.*

*The creature isn't enormous, but big enough—probably about seven or eight feet long. Its body is serpentine, with scales covering the bottom half and fur covering the top half.*

*It has four appendages that look like small legs, although they're mangled and look immobile.*

*The best way to describe it is a hairy eel.*

*With nubby little legs.*

*The creature's sides are overrun with what appears to be a series of large red gashes. It writhes on the ground, unable to move and clearly in pain.*

**SIMONE**

What do you think?

**BRYN**

I. I um...

*Creature roars again.*

**BRYN**

I need my phone!

*She bolts. Simone tackles her.*

**BRYN**

Let me go!

**SIMONE**

What, so you can what, send a picture to the cheer squad? Or a buncha lame-ass gamers?

Or some limp-dick *football* player??

**BRYN**

This is a big deal, Simone!

**SIMONE**

No shit!

**BRYN**

A *big* deal!

**SIMONE**

Bitch, you promised!

**BRYN**

And *you* promised not to say that word!

**SIMONE**

I'm allowed to cuz you're being so finger-fucking unfair! If you take a video or a picture, it's gonna get out. And then other people will see it and the government will get involved and they'll wanna kill her or study her or dissect her into little pieces!

**BRYN**

You don't know that!

**SIMONE**

The government fucks up everything that's beautiful! It's like the one thing movies always get right. And we are *not* gonna be those idiot teenagers. You hear me? We're not gonna be those dumb fucking kids on bicycles who can't keep a secret and end up causing all sorts of problems for themselves and the big beautiful thing they found. Do you understand?

*Bryn mumbles something. Simone smacks her in the shoulder.*

**SIMONE**

Answer me!

**BRYN**

I said I understand!

**SIMONE**

Good.

*She gets off of Bryn.*

**SIMONE**

Don't make me regret this.

**BRYN**

Okay.

**SIMONE**

Don't make me regret *sharing* this with you.

**BRYN**

Okay, okay!

**SIMONE**

Promise?

**BRYN**

I already promised after you *hit* me.

**SIMONE**

I had to!

**BRYN**

My word is my word, alright?

*She holds out her pinky finger.*

**BRYN**

See?

**SIMONE**

Whoa, for real?

*Bryn nods. Simone takes her pinky with her own—a sacred ritual that they probably haven't done in years. With fingers locked, they each kiss the end of their own hand (the non-pinky end).*

*Creature groans.*

**BRYN**

Is it hurt?

**SIMONE**

I think so. There's all those cuts on her side.

*Creature keeps writhing and grunting in discomfort. The girls can't take their eyes off of it.*

**BRYN**

Can I---

**SIMONE**

Go for it.

**BRYN**

Are you sure?

**SIMONE**

I've been petting her nonstop and she hasn't hurt me.

*Bryn kneels and hesitantly pets the creature on its side.*

**SIMONE**

I think she likes it.

**BRYN**

Does she?

*She runs a hand along one of the red lines.*

**BRYN**

Okay, maybe. Maybe she does.

*Creature growls softly.*

**BRYN**

It's okay. I'm just saying hi. Thaaat's it. Good girl. *(to Simone)* It's a her, right? That's what you said?

**SIMONE**

Yeah.

**BRYN**

How do you know?

**SIMONE**

There's no giant scaly dick or anything.

*Creature groans. Bryn keeps petting it.*



**BRYN**

Shhh. Shhh.

*Creature closes its eyes.*

**BRYN**

Have you ever played *Shadow of the Colossus*?

**SIMONE**

What do you think.

**BRYN**

Libby showed it to me. You ride around on a horse, destroying these sixteen giant beings. The Colossi. One of em—the seventh one—looks like her.

*She gets back to her feet.*

**BRYN**

I wonder how she got hurt.

**SIMONE**

Probably a panther. Or maybe she got stuck in a retention pipe. Poor girl.

**BRYN**

Is she healing? Those cuts look pretty bad.

**SIMONE**

They're smaller than yesterday.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

I say we keep her here. Bring her food, keep her company. Nurse her back to health.

**BRYN**

What if your mom finds her?

**SIMONE**

We could keep her in my goddamn living room and my mom wouldn't notice.

**BRYN**

Good point. What does she eat?

**SIMONE**

Valium and rice cakes, mostly.

**BRYN**

No, not your...the *animal*. What do we feed her?

**SIMONE**

Oh! She likes tuna.

**BRYN**

Have you given her water?

**SIMONE**

Plenty. But we could get, like, a trough or something.

**BRYN**

Some really big tupperware. Like those bins from Target.

**SIMONE**

Or we could build one. Like an actual trough.

**BRYN**

I dunno, Simone.

**SIMONE**

Okay, tupperware. Tupperware is good.

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

We'll have to name her.

**SIMONE**

Oh yeah, for sure. Let's see...

**BRYN**

Ooo, ooo! I've got it. Kesha.

**SIMONE**

No!

**BRYN**

Ke\$ha with a dollar sign.

**SIMONE**

*Definitely* not.

*Creature groans. Simone kneels down to pet it.*

**SIMONE**

Don't worry, girl. We'll think of something.

*Bryn joins her. They pet the creature side by side.*

**BRYN**

She's incredible. Just incredible.

**SIMONE**

Like I said. Heebie-jeebies.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

We're gonna take care of her.

*She holds out her pinky finger.*

**SIMONE**

Together.

*Bryn takes Simone's pinky.*

**BRYN**

Together.

*They each kiss their own hand again. The non-pinky end.*

## **TWO.**

*The next day. A long tupperware bin—yes, the kind you get at Target—has been moved into the clearing and filled with water. Empty tuna fish cans are scattered about.*

*The gashes on the creature's sides have been bandaged, its breathing more labored than before.*

*Simone sits next to the creature with her head on its side, rising with its ribs every time it inhales.*

## **SIMONE**

Saw this in an old movie once.

*Creature breathes. Simone listens.*

## **SIMONE**

Always wanted to do it myself. But never had someone big enough.

*Creature breathes. Simone listens.*

## **SIMONE**

Had a St. Bernard when I was like 13. I'd try it with him, but my head was too heavy and he couldn't breathe.

*Creature breathes. Simone listens.*

**SIMONE**

His name was Space Jam. Some dumb cartoon from when my mom was a kid.

*Creature breathes. Simone listens.*

**SIMONE**

Space Jam...He got run over by my neighbor's Cadillac on Halloween.

*Creature breathes. Simone half-listens.*

**SIMONE**

No, fuck that. He got run over by my *neighbor*. Kevin Murphy's dad. Kevin's my age and has this 2-year-old brother named Lonnie who's the last kid in our neighborhood to be born. So their family gets treated like royalty. The dad is this big fucking fat guy who wears a faded wife-beater with a picture of a fish on it. Bathing suit. Flip-flops. Hat repping the Navy. That's how all Florida dads look. They can be fat or skinny, but they've all got the Navy hat and the fish shirt. Some of em have mustaches. Faces so tan and leathery, you just know they're gonna get skin cancer one day if they don't have it already.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

I hope Kevin's dad *does* get skin cancer.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

I told Bryn that and she got all pissy like she always does when I talk about morbid stuff. But it's like, most people who get skin cancer live. I don't want him to *die* or anything. And even if I did, that seems about right. Fucker killed my dog. Why shouldn't cancer kill him?

*She sits up, no longer listening.*

**SIMONE**

Know what the vet told us? That if it wasn't a Cadillac, Space Jam might've survived. It was this old-ass vehicle from the stone age, back when everyone was racist and listened to Jerry Lee Lewis. Really big with all these stupid fins on it. Like, everything was sharp on that car for no reason. The fins were what really hurt Space Jam. I mean, yeah, it was my fault for leaving the sliding door open, but if Kevin's dad wasn't obsessed with that stupid fucking car and just drove a Prius or a Bolt or a Volt or something hybrid or electric like we're all *supposed* to, Space Jam might be alive today. He'd be old, but he'd be alive.

*She lies back down on the creature's side.*



**SIMONE**

One time, I told my mom all that at dinner and she said I couldn't say that sorta stuff. It pissed me off. But it's also weird cuz I wish...I wish my mom still talked to me like that.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

I wish my mom still talked to me at all.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

I wish she still knew how to take care of me.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

I dunno.

*Creature breathes. Simone listens.*

**SIMONE**

Fucking Kevin's fat fucking dad. Space Jam deserves to be alive way more than that asshole. Why did everyone side with him? Cuz it was dark out? Cuz I left the door open?

Cuz he's a human and Space Jam was a dog? Cuz that's bullshit. Humans fuck shit up.  
We ruin everything.

*Creature burps, jostling Simone's head.*

**SIMONE**

Ow!

*She laughs.*

**SIMONE**

You did that on purpose.

*Creature grunts and goes back to breathing. Simone puts her head back on its side.*

**SIMONE**

I like talking to you.

*Creature breathes. Simone listens.*

**SIMONE**

You get enough water?

*Creature sighs contentedly.*

**SIMONE**

I'll take that as a yes.

*Creature breathes. Simone closes her eyes.*

**SIMONE**

Let's stay like this forever.

*Creature breathes. Simone opens her eyes.*

**SIMONE**

That's something you'd say to your boyfriend or girlfriend or whoever you're in love with. But I like saying it to you. I hope that's not creepy.

*She lifts her head and looks into the creature's eyes.*

**SIMONE**

Is that creepy?

*Creature grunts.*

**SIMONE**

I didn't think so.

*She puts her head back down on the creature's side.*

**SIMONE**

We're not creepy. You and me. Not creepy at all.

*Creature breathes. Simone listens. Bryn enters with her backpack.*

**BRYN**

Where were you?

**SIMONE**

Bryn!

*She runs to Bryn and hugs her—the kind of overeager embrace from someone who's spent the entire day talking to their pet.*

**SIMONE**

You won't believe all the cool stuff she's started doing. Grunting and yawning and actually *listening* to me. You left your phone in the tree, right?

**BRYN** (*pushing away Simone*)

Where. Were you.

**SIMONE**

Here! Duh. We had a great day, full of playing and talking and eating like an entire pyramid's worth of tuna cans. You know Mickey Storno? The bagboy at Publix? He gave me the hookup. I told him it was for my cat. I don't even *have* a cat!

**BRYN**

So you stole it?

**SIMONE**

No, no, no, Mickey *hooked me up*.

**BRYN**

So Mickey stole it.

**SIMONE**

He said any time I needed tuna, I just had to ask. Then he smiled at me, but his Invisalign popped out cuz it always pops out when he smiles cuz it's not fitted right and I felt kinda bad about the whole thing. Mickey's *sooo* awkward. But sweet. And thanks to him, our girl gets to eat for *free*. You want some? You can spread it on a Saltine. It's our new fave snack. Right, girl?

*Creature grunts.*

**SIMONE**

See?? She understands me!

**BRYN**

You weren't in Biology.

**SIMONE**

I was gonna go after coming here this morning, but we were having too much fun.

What'd I miss?

**BRYN**

Um, our science-fair project for one.

**SIMONE**

Oh shit.

**BRYN**

Yeah.

**SIMONE**

Sorry. I got wrapped up.

**BRYN**

And you think that's okay?

**SIMONE**

Oh, come on. The science fair sucks ass. That Russian girl will probably win again. Liz or Elizabetha or whatever her name is.

**BRYN**

Yelizaveta.

**SIMONE**

Whatever. Did she win?

**BRYN**

Of course she won! That's not the point. I know it's fun coming out here, but you can't just disconnect from everything. Especially when other people / are counting on you.

**SIMONE**

Fine, fine, fine. I won't miss any more projects.

**BRYN**

Or classes or SAT Prep or anything. You need to have options / when the school year ends.

**SIMONE**

Okay. You're right.

**BRYN**

And one more thing. You can't just expect me to... Wait, what?

**SIMONE**

I said you're right.

**BRYN**

Just like that?

**SIMONE**

I kinda like it when you talk to me all stern about my future. I've been missing that.

**BRYN**

Okay. I'll um... I'll keep doing it, then.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

Anything else from class?

**BRYN**

Actually, yeah. Ms. Sutter showed us this Bay News 9 clip. The water's coming over the seawall. There were these huge waves swelling and breaking over the top. Right onto Anclote Beach.



**SIMONE**

That's all the way in Holiday.

**BRYN**

Which is the next town over.

**SIMONE**

Did anyone die?

**BRYN**

No. But the water got all the way to Sun Toyota before it stopped.

**SIMONE**

So a buncha used-car salesmen lose their jobs. We're still safe in our little copse of woods.

**BRYN**

"Copse." Good word.

**SIMONE**

I read it in that rabbit book from Ms. Dukeman's class.

**BRYN**

The bloody one?

**SIMONE**

Yeah. The bloody bunnies. Heh.

**BRYN**

Heh.

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

You got a name for her yet?

**SIMONE**

I'm working on it.

**BRYN**

Cuz I've got one.

**SIMONE**

Let's hear it.

**BRYN**

How about...Serpentine.

**SIMONE**

That sounds like a stripper.

**BRYN**

And then we could call her Teeny for short.

**SIMONE**

Ew, no!

**BRYN**

I thought it was pretty good.

**SIMONE**

“Pretty good” won’t cut it. It needs to be perfect. And I’m sorry, but we can do waaay better than Serpentine. Now come here. I wanna show you something.

*Bryn joins her and the creature. Simone puts her head back on the creature’s side and listens.*

**SIMONE**

Try it.

*Bryn puts her head on the creature’s side.*

**SIMONE**

Listen.

*They do.*

**SIMONE**

Rise.

*Creature breathes. It sounds painful.*

**SIMONE**

Listen.

*They do.*

**BRYN**

It's so relaxing.

**SIMONE**

I knew you'd like it.

*They continue listening to the creature breathing, reciting the routine together.*

**SIMONE AND BRYN**

Rise. Listen. Rise. Listen.

*Creature burps again, jostling their heads. They laugh.*

**SIMONE**

She does that.

*She and Bryn put their ears back to the creature's side.*

**SIMONE AND BRYN**

Rise. Listen. Rise...

*Creature breathes. They listen.*

**THREE.**

*Another day, a week later. The creature alone. Bandaged and still in pain.*

*It writhes.*

*It roars.*

*It snaps at the air.*

*It tears off its bandages.*

*It goes still, its breathing a bit more relaxed.*

*Moments pass.*

*Bryn enters.*

**BRYN**

Hey, you.

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

No Simone, huh? She must have actually gone to SAT Prep. Good for her.

*She looks around.*

**BRYN**

I'll tell you what, though. She is such. A. Mess!

*She starts cleaning up the tuna cans. Creature groans.*

**BRYN**

Okay, okay, I'll stop. Alll my attention is on you.

*She kneels next to the creature and puts a hand on its side.*

**BRYN**

You need to keep these on.

*She rewraps the bandages.*

**BRYN**

You're due for some new ones anyway.

*Creature winces.*

**BRYN**

Maybe you want some water?

*Creature groans.*

**BRYN**

Yeah?

*She slides the tupperware bin toward the creature.*

**BRYN**

Looks good, huh?

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

Here.

*She cups some water in her hands and holds it out to the creature.*

**BRYN**

Just a little.

*Creature laps the water from her hands.*



**BRYN**

That's good.

*Creature rests its head on the ground.*

**BRYN**

All done?

*Creature closes its eyes.*

**BRYN**

That's good. You need all the rest you can get.

*She takes a copy of Watership Down from her backpack, sits on the ground, and reads.*

*Creature opens its eyes and watches her. Bryn freezes, feeling its presence.*

*She looks up from her book. They stare at each other. Creature grunts.*

**BRYN**

You want me to---

*Creature grunts. Bryn moves closer to it.*

**BRYN**

Like this?

*Creature grunts.*

**BRYN**

Okay. Easy, girl.

*She goes back to reading. Creature continues to stare. Bryn puts down her book.*

**BRYN**

Wanna see a cool game?

*Creature grunts. Bryn takes out her phone.*

**BRYN**

Just promise you won't tell Simone.

*Creature grunts. Bryn laughs.*

**BRYN**

You really are something.

*"Godzilla."*

**BRYN**

Sorry, one sec.

*She texts.*

*“Godzilla.”*

*Bryn texts and laughs.*

*Creature lifts its head.*

**BRYN**

What?

*Creature glares at Bryn.*

**BRYN**

I just don't like leaving it in the tree.

*Creature grunts and slithers closer to her.*

**BRYN**

Uh...

*She backs away. Creature moves closer.*

**BRYN**

Okay, okay! Ummm...Maybe you still wanna see the game?

*Creature grunts.*

**BRYN**

Cool. Just...be nice.

*She sits right next to the creature. It grunts. She reluctantly leans back against its body.*

**BRYN**

Nice. Yeah. This is nice. We're just hanging out. See?

*Creature exhales, more relaxed. Bryn shows it her phone.*

**BRYN**

This one's called *Bubble Tea Barista*. It's my favorite. You see those little balls? Those are tapioca pearls. The goal is to fish em out with your spoon before the water gets too hot. Otherwise, they get all mushy and melt away. Watch.

*She plays the game.*

**BRYN**

All the old games are about fighting and killing. But the new games are about calming people down. Like this one. It's so easy and no one gets hurt.

*Sound effects from the video game. Creature watches Bryn play.*

**FOUR.**

*Another day, two weeks later. Simone, Bryn, and the creature. More tuna fish cans strewn about.*

*Bryn has a bag of grapes. As they talk, she periodically tosses grapes at Simone's mouth. Simone keeps missing. The creature dozes peacefully.*

**SIMONE**

I dunno. Some kinda fighting game.

**BRYN**

*Tekken?*

**SIMONE**

What's that?

**BRYN**

It's like the fighting game to end all fighting games.

**SIMONE**

Never heard of it.

**BRYN**

Yeah you have.

*Grape toss.*

**SIMONE**

I am not so into video games.

**BRYN**

You used to be.

**SIMONE**

Was I?

**BRYN**

We used to play *Mario Kart* like every day at the Y.

**SIMONE**

Did we?

**BRYN**

*Yes*, Simone. Back when the pools were open and everyone still liked to swim.

Remember the waterslide?

**SIMONE**

Corkscrew-y one?

**BRYN**

Yeah.

*Grape toss.*

**SIMONE**

I *kinda* remember that?

**BRYN**

We'd go down the slide, then play *Mario Kart X* the rest of the day. You always wanted to be Bowser, but he was so heavy and slow that you never won.

*Grape.*

**SIMONE**

Oh yeah! You were always a small character. Princess Daisy---

**BRYN**

Peach.



**SIMONE**

Whatevs.

**BRYN**

Daisy sucks.

*Grape.*

**SIMONE**

Yeah she does.

**BRYN**

Everyone always wants to be Daisy. But Peach is way better. Even the word. Peach.

**SIMONE**

Peeeach.

**BRYN**

Peeeeeee---

**SIMONE**

---eeeeeeee---

**BRYN**

---EEEEEEE---

**SIMONE**

---EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE---

**BRYN**

This is so fun!

**SIMONE**

I know! It feels like eighth grade.

*Grape.*

**BRYN**

I was always Princess Peach or Diddy Kong---

**SIMONE**

Titty Kong.

*Bryn laughs.*

**SIMONE**

Diddy-Titty Kong.

*More laughter.*

**BRYN**

You're gonna make me cry!

**SIMONE**

I'm very funny!

**BRYN**

I was always Princess Peach---

**SIMONE**

Or Diddy-Widdle-Titty Kong.

**BRYN**

*Princess Peach.* And I'd always win and one day it was too much for you to take so you threw my Switch Triple into the *pool*.

**SIMONE**

No!

**BRYN**

Yes!

*Grape.*

**SIMONE**

I did not.

**BRYN**

You did!

*Grape.*

**SIMONE**

Stop throwing grapes at me!

**BRYN**

Start catching em!

**SIMONE**

It's hard!

**BRYN**

I know!

**SIMONE**

The grapes are so *haaard*!

**BRYN**

They're seedless!

*Grape.*

**SIMONE**

Ow!

*They both laugh.*

**SIMONE**

But yeah, I remember the game. And the slide. But drowning your Switch?

**BRYN**

It happened.

**SIMONE**

No, I know it happened. I just don't *remember* it happening.

**BRYN**

Maybe you don't *wanna* remember it.

**SIMONE**

I do that sometimes.

**BRYN**

We all do.

**SIMONE**

And why not? Why not just remember the good shit?

*Grape.*

**BRYN**

So they were playing *Mario Kart*?

**SIMONE**

No, no, *Tekken*.

**BRYN**

Which *Tekken*? There's like four million of em.

**SIMONE**

Actually, wait. Now I don't even know if it was *Tekken*.

**BRYN**

Then what game was it?

**SIMONE**

Does it really matter?

**BRYN**

Yes!

**SIMONE**

I can't remember. I am not so into video games.

**BRYN**

You've said that.

**SIMONE**

Cuz it's true! So pick a game. Any game. Your favorite game.

**BRYN**

*Tekken 3.*

**SIMONE**

I thought there were like four million of em.

**BRYN**

Yeah, but 3 is the best. There's this one guy named Ogre and he's an immortal Aztec God with green skin and this gold headdress and he is just a *boss*. Like, literally and

figuratively. He's the last person you fight, but he'd still be a boss even if he wasn't, you know? And you think you've beaten him, but then at the last second, he turns into True Ogre, which is this big hairy gargoyle-looking thing with horns and tusks and wings. Even when you kill him, he never truly dies. You still feel his presence. It's so incredible and so scary and whenever I talk about True Ogre, I want to *be* him.

**SIMONE**

Okay, okay, I get it. You really like *Tekken 3*.

**BRYN**

I'm kinda obsessed.

**SIMONE**

Okay, so they're playing *Tekken 3*, then. Let's say Justin Rullo is playing as True Ogre.

**BRYN**

Did he already beat regular Ogre?

**SIMONE**

What?

**BRYN**

You can't be True Ogre until you've beaten regular Ogre.



**SIMONE**

I don't fucking know!

**BRYN**

It's an important detail!

**SIMONE**

Okay, okay! Yes, let's say Justin has already beaten the game and yes, he's playing it again as True Ogre and Libby bets him he *can't* beat the game.

**BRYN**

But he's already beaten the game.

**SIMONE**

Fucking shit, Bryn, you're messing up my story.

**BRYN**

I'm just ironing out the logistics. If he's True Ogre, that means he's already beaten the game and it wouldn't be that hard for him to beat it again.

**SIMONE**

Okay, fine. Who's another character that you can be from the very beginning?

**BRYN**

Oh God, there's a ton of em.

*Creature snores. The girls laugh.*

**SIMONE**

See? Even she's getting bored. Just pick.

**BRYN**

Ummm...

**SIMONE**

Hurry.

**BRYN**

Ummmmmmmm...

*Simone laughs and picks up a discarded grape.*

**SIMONE**

You're doing it on purpose!

*She throws the grape at Bryn. It hits her square in the face.*

**BRYN**

Ow!

**SIMONE**

See? Shit hurts. Now pick.

**BRYN**

Um...Julia Chang. She's this half-Chinese, half-Native American fighter who moonlights as a reforestation ranger.

**SIMONE**

Ooo, that's cool.

**BRYN**

Julia's the best.

**SIMONE**

Awesome. So Justin is Julia Chang. And Libby bets him he can't beat *Tekken 3* in one sitting. And they're like kinda laughing and kinda flirting and he's like "What'll you give me if I can?" And totally stone-faced, she looks at him and says "A handjob."

**BRYN**

No way.

**SIMONE**

Yes!

**BRYN**

How do you know all this?

**SIMONE**

Kristen Paloma.

**BRYN**

Of course.

**SIMONE**

I know, right? Gossipy trick. And *she* was told by Nicole Ciruzzo, who was told by Fred Goodman, who was told by Adam Hoobler, who witnessed the whoooole thing.

**BRYN**

He was there??

**SIMONE**

Well, kinda. It was his house and they were in his dad's den, but they made him go upstairs. But he *heard* everything and Justin told him the deets later. Adam's *such* a lil toadie.

**BRYN**

Got it.

**SIMONE**

So of course Justin focuses *really* hard on beating this game in one sitting and of course he does and of course they start making out and Libby pulls out his dick and starts jerking him or whatever and it's all going according to plan, but then...

**BRYN**

Then?

**SIMONE**

Then...It's funny.

**BRYN**

Yeah?

**SIMONE**

Like *really* funny.

**BRYN**

Tell me!

**SIMONE**

You know how Libby has those long-ass fake purple nails? Ugly lil grape popsicles.

**BRYN**

I think they're cute.

**SIMONE**

Gross. Well I guess she got too close and pressed up against Justin or something, cuz her thumbnail *jams* right into his dickhole.

**BRYN**

No!

**SIMONE**

Yes! And then that shit *breaks off*. And Justin's howling and jumping around Adam's dad's den with this big old purple nail-shard sticking outta his dick and I'll bet there was probably blood that got all over all those stupid fucking pinewood derby trophies.

**BRYN**

What'd Libby do?

**SIMONE**

Laughed. Laughed and laughed and laughed. What else? She's such a slut.

**BRYN**

Why.

**SIMONE**

What?

**BRYN**

Why is she a slut?

**SIMONE**

Um, cuz she gave Justin Rullo a handy just for winning a stupid video game?

**BRYN**

So? If she likes him and he likes her and they both wanna do that, who cares?

**SIMONE**

I'd care. Shit didn't exactly end well.

**BRYN**

They're fine. They were bowling together at Astro Lanes.

**SIMONE**

When did you go to Astro Lanes?

**BRYN**

Ummm...Friday?

**SIMONE**

With who?

**BRYN**

It was Heather DiBrizzi's birthday.

**SIMONE**

Um, thanks for inviting me?

**BRYN**

Oh come on. It was just me and some of the squad.

**SIMONE**

And Justin.

**BRYN**

He's Libby's boyfriend. Kinda.

**SIMONE**

Wowww.



**BRYN**

You *hate* hanging out with the team.

**SIMONE**

It's still nice to get invited.

**BRYN**

It wasn't my place to invite you. It was / Heather DiBrizzi's birthday.

**SIMONE**

Heather DiBrizzi's birthday. I know.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

Anyway, it's fine.

**BRYN**

No, you're right. I should've asked if you could come along.

**SIMONE**

Fuck it. Astro Lanes sucks anyway.

**BRYN**

I like it.

**SIMONE**

That glow-in-the-dark blacklight shit is so lame. Did you see any cum on Justin's pants?

**BRYN**

Don't be gross.

**SIMONE**

What? If they're dating and all.

**BRYN**

Libby's really nice.

**SIMONE**

Cuz she's a cheerleader who likes video games?

**BRYN**

Cuz she's a good friend.

**SIMONE**

If she's such a good friend, then why didn't she tell you about her and Justin? Hmmm?

Why did you have to hear it from *me*?

**BRYN**

Cuz it's none of my business.

**SIMONE**

I'm just saying, if she's your *friend*---

**BRYN**

It was nice to see her and Justin having a good time together, okay? Like, maybe they had this weird handjob thing that didn't go well, but they were able to get past it. They were able to still be happy. I just want everyone to be happy.

**SIMONE**

Okay, okay, forget I said anything. Hey, catch!

*She tosses another discarded grape at Bryn, who manages to catch it in her mouth. The catch is impressive, but also morose. Deadpan—if catching a grape can be deadpan.*

**SIMONE**

Nice!

*Bryn chews the grape.*

**BRYN**

This one's mushy.

**SIMONE**

Hard to get good grapes these days.

*Creature farts. The girls LOSE it.*

**SIMONE**

Holy shit.

**BRYN**

That was brilliant.

**SIMONE**

Brilliantly *awful*. The smell!

**BRYN**

And so *loud*!

**SIMONE**

I think it's her way of applauding!

*Creature closes its eyes and snores slowly and steadily throughout the rest of the scene.*

**BRYN**

You think she's getting better?

**SIMONE**

She's fine.

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

Did you feed her today?

**SIMONE**

Gave her some tilapia from Publix.

**BRYN**

Publix tilapia is the best tilapia.

**SIMONE**

Especially when you have the Mickey Storno discount.

*Creature groans.*

**BRYN**

Maybe we should call a vet.

**SIMONE**

No way.

**BRYN**

What about Ms. Dobbins?

**SIMONE**

She's the school nurse!

**BRYN**

Exactly. She's sworn to secrecy with her students. What do they call that?

**SIMONE**

Hippo-something.

**BRYN**

Yeah, the oath.

*Creature groans again.*

**SIMONE**

Let's give it a day. If you're still worried tomorrow, we'll figure something out.

**BRYN**

We'll call a doctor?

**SIMONE**

We'll figure something out.

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

What about a name?

**SIMONE**

We can't rush it.

**BRYN**

Cuz I was thinking---

**SIMONE**

Not now, Bryn.

*Creature breathes. Bryn looks hurt.*

**SIMONE**

Hey.

*Bryn doesn't respond.*

**SIMONE**

Heeey.

*Bryn looks up at her.*

**SIMONE**

If you catch this grape, I'll give you the World's Worst Handjob.

*Bryn falls over laughing. Simone really can be pretty funny. Creature snores.*



**FIVE.**

*The next day. The creature alone, its bandages once again removed.*

*It snaps at the air, more aggressively than before.*

*It goes still.*

*Is it dead?*

*Then, it EXPLODES, convulsing and thrashing its tail and biting at whatever it can.*

*It goes still again.*

*It breathes, laboredly.*

*Bryn enters with her backpack. She picks up the bandages.*

**BRYN**

Again??

*She kneels down to re-dress the gashes.*

**BRYN**

I swear, the amount of money we're having to spend on---

*The creature gasps for air.*

**BRYN**

More water? Is that it?

*She drags the bin over to the creature.*

**BRYN**

Come on. Drink up.

*Creature doesn't touch the water.*

**BRYN**

Please drink. Just a little.

*No response.*

**BRYN**

Come on, girl.

*She nudges the bin toward the creature. It FLIPS OUT, sloshing water all over its gashes.*

**BRYN**

Careful!

*Creature gasps for air.*

**BRYN**

You have to drink. If you don't drink, you'll die and Simone will be so sad. I'll be sad, too, but she'll... This is like the first time in her life that I've seen her happy. Like, *truly* happy. And... Yeah, just... *happy*. If you die, she'll die. I know that's stupid, but I just feel like she will. So you can't---

*A nasty squishing sound. The gashes appear to be...expanding? Yeah, expanding.*

*Widening. Deepening.*

**BRYN**

What're you---

*Creature roars. Bryn covers her ears.*

**BRYN**

Don't do that! It scares me when you do that!

*The gashes expand a bit more, then relax. Creature stops roaring. It goes still. Then the gashes expand and contract, expand and contract.*

*Like lungs.*

*Bryn slowly removes her hands from her ears and approaches the creature again.*

**BRYN**

Are you...

*Expand. Contract. Bryn watches intently. The expansions and contractions stop.*

**BRYN**

Wait a sec...

*She cups some water in her hands. She holds the water over the creature, then releases it over the gashes. Expand. Contract.*

**BRYN**

Oh my God.

*She repeats the process. She takes out her phone and dials.*

**BRYN**

Come on, come on, come on...(into the phone) Simone! I'm with...Ugh, I just wish you would let me name her. But yeah, I know I'm on my phone and I know I'm not supposed to bring it out here, but if you get this, you *have* to call me back. Please!

*She hangs up, goes to put her phone back in her pocket, but looks back at the creature.*

**BRYN**

Screw it.

*She kneels next to the creature.*

**BRYN**

She needs to see this.

*She films the creature. Expand. Contract.*

**SIX.**

*Later that day. Simone and Bryn hover over the creature. Bryn has water cupped in her hands.*

**BRYN**

Watch.

*She releases the water over the creature's gashes. Expand. Contract.*

**BRYN**

They're breathing.

**SIMONE**

Why are her cuts breathing?

**BRYN**

Cuz they're not cuts. They're gills.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

Like...*gill* gills?

**BRYN**

No, the other kinda gills. Yes, *gill* gills.

*She cups another handful of water from the bin.*

**SIMONE**

She's not a fish.

**BRYN**

Not yet.

**SIMONE**

The fuck's that supposed to mean?

**BRYN**

She's evolving.

*She releases the water over the gills. They breathe.*

**BRYN**

She's got lungs, but she's also grown gills. And see her legs?

*She holds up one of the creature's nubs.*

*Which are, of course, not actually nubs.*

**SIMONE**

You're gonna hurt her!

**BRYN**

No, no, look. They're, like, flippers. Or turning into flippers. I'm telling you, Simone.

Whatever she was before, she's evolving.

**SIMONE**

Bullshit.

**BRYN**

Think about it. Think about the news and the weather and the water and the Maldives and Miami and all of it.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

Fuck.

**BRYN**

No, it's good! It means she'll survive when the woods become a swamp. We don't have to take care of her. We *never* had to take care of her.



**SIMONE**

But if she's got gills, then her lungs are---

**BRYN**

That's what I thought, too. But watch.

*The gills contract, nearly closing up.*

**SIMONE**

Fucking Christ, give her some water, Bryn.

**BRYN**

Just watch.

*Creature goes still for a second, then starts breathing through its mouth.*

**BRYN**

See? She can do both! She's like a mudskipper or a caecilian!

**SIMONE**

The fuck is a caecilian?

**BRYN**

They're like giant worms mixed with fish. They're amphibious. Able to thrive in two very different worlds.

*She looks at the creature with admiration.*

**BRYN**

Just like her.

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

She's getting ready. For migration. For the water. For whatever's gonna come next.

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

You look sad.

**SIMONE**

I'm not.

**BRYN**

You have nothing to worry about. Gilly's gonna be fine.

**SIMONE**

Who?

**BRYN**

Oh, right! I forgot to tell you. I think we should call her Gilly. Isn't it perfect?

*Simone looks like she wants to kill her.*

**BRYN**

You know, cuz she has gills.

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

Pretty cool, huh? We don't have to come out here anymore. Our Gilly's all grown up.

Ready to leave the nest.

*"Godzilla."*

**BRYN**

Whoops. Sorry.

*She silences her phone.*

**SIMONE**

You should've never brought your phone out here.

**BRYN**

I just forgot.

**SIMONE**

You *forgot*? You're telling me this is the first time you haven't put it in the tree? That you haven't just been lying to appease me this entire fucking time?

**BRYN**

...

**SIMONE**

You know where *I* was when you called?

**BRYN**

Where.

**SIMONE**

SAT Prep with Mr. Colen.

**BRYN**

Colen. Heh.

**SIMONE**

Don't "heh" me. I changed my entire routine—actually started giving a shit about all this college stuff—and you can't even stand to be away from your stupid group chat for five fucking minutes.

**BRYN**

It's not that big a deal.

**SIMONE**

Are you kidding me? How do I know that footage didn't get lost in the Cloud? Or that you didn't send it to *National Geographic*? Or your little cheerleader friends? How do I know you haven't been filming her and texting about her this entire time??

**BRYN**

Cuz I wouldn't do that!

**SIMONE**

But how do I *know*?? How am I supposed to know anything about you anymore?

**BRYN**

Jesus Christ, Simone, I thought you'd be excited.

**SIMONE**

Oh, I'm excited.

**BRYN**

Good.

**SIMONE**

*So excited.*

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

I have to go.

**BRYN**

You just got here.

**SIMONE**

Homework.

**BRYN**

Since when do you care about homework?

**SIMONE**

Since you *asked* me to.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

I kept my promise. I just wish you had, too.

*She exits. Bryn alone with the creature.*

**SEVEN.**

*The next day. The creature alone, no longer in pain. It breathes peacefully.*

*Simone enters carrying an old-school, battery-powered boombox. Her backpack is overflowing with belongings.*

**SIMONE**

Gilly? It is time---

*She places the boombox on the ground.*

**SIMONE**

---to---

*She takes off her backpack.*

**SIMONE**

---PARTYYYYYYYYYY!

*She presses play on the boombox. Upbeat pop music blares from the speakers. It's something no one in the audience will have heard before: a pop song from the future. Simone shouts over it.*



**SIMONE**

Found this in the garage! I think it belonged to my mom!

*She starts dancing.*

**SIMONE**

The batteries are HUGE! Like, they could power a robot!

*Creature doesn't react. Obviously.*

**SIMONE**

This is Bubba Neuwirth! One of my faves!

*More dancing. Some kind of exclamatory move from Simone: a kick or a headbang or a hair-flip. Maybe all three.*

**SIMONE**

Do you love it? Cuz I do!

*She rummages through her backpack, naming objects as she throws them onto the ground.*

**SIMONE**

I brought all *sorts* of fun shit! Board games and a beach ball and blankets and lotsa other b-words. Like Bubba Neuwirth!

*She dances some more. Kick. Headbang. Hair-flip.*

**SIMONE**

Stuff that doesn't begin with "b," too. Shampoo and toothpaste and Pop-Tarts and caramel corn and some deer jerky for protein. I even brought a s'mores kit! And of course, how could I forget...muthafucking tiLApia! Mickey Storno got fired, so I had to steal it from Publix myself. Only the finest for my Gilly.

*She unwraps a tilapia filet. Creature perks up.*

**SIMONE**

See? I just *knew* you'd like Bubba Neuwirth!

*She moves the tilapia filet from side to side with the rhythm. Creature's head follows with it.*

*It's really fucking cute.*

**SIMONE**

Look, you're dancing! To the beat, to the beat, to the beat...

*Creature lunges at the filet.*

*It's really fucking scary.*

*Simone hops back and cackles.*

**SIMONE**

Whoa, whoa, okay!

*Creature snaps at Simone's hand. She just keeps laughing.*

**SIMONE**

Okay, okay! Here you go, girl!

*She tosses the tilapia to the creature as if it were a sea lion. Creature promptly gobbles up the filet. Simone rummages through more belongings.*

**SIMONE**

Towel, lil propane torch, couple MREs—I raided all my mom's ranger shit cuz she doesn't caaare—blanket, pillowcase—I'll stuff it with Spanish moss—journal, utensils, binoculars, *more* tilapia, and *phew*! I'll never have to go home again!

*It starts getting dark out—the moon and sun trading places at the speed of the music.*

**SIMONE** (*shouting to the sky*)

No, no, no, Mr. Sun! We are just. Getting. STARTED!

*She kicks the beach ball and almost trips. The ball hits the creature in the head.*

**SIMONE**

Come on, Gilly. Play with me! If the sun wants to sleep on us, we'll just play and play and play!

*We're in full-on nighttime.*

**SIMONE** (*shouting to the sky*)

Oh, you think it's time for bed? Think again! WHOO!

*She does a cartwheel or some other kind of acrobatic move that lots of people know how to do.*

**SIMONE**

Can't stop, won't stop, can't stop, won't stop, s'mores!

*She unwraps a chocolate bar. Huge bite.*

**SIMONE**

Nom, nom, nom, nom, nom!

*She throws the chocolate bar aside. The music's still going. Night rapidly shifts to morning. To the beat, to the beat, to the beat.*

**SIMONE**

Can't stop, won't stop, can't stop, won't stop...

*She tears open a pack of Pop-Tarts and half-eats, half-destroys them.*

**SIMONE**

Nom, nom, nom, nom, nom.

*She smashes the rest of the Pop-Tarts in her hands.*

**SIMONE**

Fairy dust!

*She showers herself and the creature with Pop-Tart crumbs. She dances. Scribbles in her journal. Dances. Kick. Headbang. Hair-flip. Tosses the creature another tilapia filet. Day gives way to night. To the beat, to the beat, to the beat.*

*Morning. Simone brushes her teeth without water. If the song ends, there's always another one.*

*Night.*

*Morning.*

*Night.*

*Morning.*

*Night.*

*Morning.*

*Has she even slept?*

**SIMONE**

It all just keeps going! Bubba Neuwirth's got so. Many. Good. *SONGS!*

*She accidentally steps on one of the creature's flippers. It lets out a pained ROAR.*

*And with that, the music cuts out. Time slows back to normal.*

*Simone looks dazed. She runs to the boombox. She presses play several times. Nothing.*

*She puts an ear to the speakers.*

**SIMONE**

It died.

*She removes several chunky D-size batteries from the boombox.*

**SIMONE**

See? Told you they were big.

*She drops the batteries to the ground. The clearing is a wreck—strewn with tuna cans and food wrappers and beach balls and notebook pages and everything else Simone brought with her.*

**SIMONE**

Sorry I stepped on your fli...your leg.

*She kneels next to the creature and rubs its flipper.*

**SIMONE**

Are you okay?

*Creature grunts. Simone keeps petting the flipper.*

**SIMONE**

It's getting really smooth.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

Good for swimming.

*She bursts into tears and sprawls herself over the creature.*

**SIMONE**

Don't go. You big, stupid animal. Don't go, Gilly.

*Without realizing it, she cries right into the creature's gills. They expand and contract, startling Simone. She sits up, sees the gills moving, and laughs. She wipes her eyes.*

**SIMONE**

Ridiculous. You're fucking ridiculous.

*She lies back down on the creature.*

**SIMONE**

You're ridiculous and I'll miss you.

*Creature sighs contentedly. Simone curls up on the ground next to it in a fetal position, tucked into the creature's coil. They breathe together.*

*Bryn rushes in, out of breath and wearing a cheerleading uniform.*



**BRYN**

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, have you been watching the news?

**SIMONE**

What do you think.

**BRYN**

The water's coming.

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

I said the / water's coming.

**SIMONE**

I heard what you said.

**BRYN**

So come on.

*Simone doesn't move.*

**BRYN**

Look, I know you've been out here playing *Pete's Dragon* or whatever for like five days---

**SIMONE**

Six days.

**BRYN**

---but it is time to go. They've closed off 54, but I think DeCubellis is still open. We can make it if we move fast enough.

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

Do you remember how she'd burp?

**BRYN**

What?

**SIMONE**

When our heads were on her stomach.

**BRYN**

Oh. Um...yeah. Yeah, that was fun.

**SIMONE**

Heh.

**BRYN**

Heh.

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

How about when she ate those grapes?

**SIMONE**

Oh yeah!

**BRYN**

She'd swallow ten at a time---

**SIMONE**

---then shit em out whole! *(gun noise)* Pew, pew, pew!

*They laugh again, then go silent. Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

We should get going. For real.

**SIMONE**

We have to stay with her. Just til the water gets here. We'll see her off, make sure she doesn't get too scared. Then you can go back.

**BRYN**

Once the woods are flooded, *we* won't be able to *get* back.

**SIMONE**

So call 911.

**BRYN**

My phone's in the tree.

**SIMONE**

Bullshit.

**BRYN**

I swear.

**SIMONE**

If it was actually in the tree, you'd be biting your nails or hyperventilating or having a full-on panic attack or seizure or something.

**BRYN**

I came out here to *save* you. / You do realize that, right?

**SIMONE**

Oh, sooo heroic. Fucking Spider-Bryn over here.

**BRYN**

Why are you being such a...

**SIMONE**

What?

**BRYN**

Never mind.

**SIMONE**

No, what? What am I being?

**BRYN**

Nothing, alright?

**SIMONE**

No, come on, Bryn. Say it. I wanna hear you say it for once.

**BRYN**

No!

**SIMONE**

Am I being a...a...a *bitch*?

*She covers her mouth in mock terror.*

**SIMONE**

Oh no! I said it! I said the wirty dord! I said *bitch*! Ahhhhh! Bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch / bitch, bitch.

**BRYN**

I would never call you that.

**SIMONE**

But you want to.

**BRYN**

But I *wouldn't*.

**SIMONE**

Why not? It's a very cheerleadery thing to say.

**BRYN**

Actually, it's a very *Simone* thing to say.

**SIMONE**

Oh wow. / Wowww.

**BRYN**

So I'm not gonna say it. Unlike some people, I know how to keep myself from saying things that would hurt my friends.

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

Your mom's been asking about you.

**SIMONE**

She has?

**BRYN**

She wants you to come home.

*Simone looks like she might cry again.*

**SIMONE**

If she really cared, she would've come herself. And you...Just look at you. All dolled up and itching to hang out with your new friends.

**BRYN**

It's gameday.

**SIMONE**

See? See?? Do you see what a fucking hypocrite you are? You're out here warning me about the woods flooding in the same breath as ditching me for a *football* game that I'm pretty sure is gonna get canceled.

**BRYN**

I didn't know that when I got dressed this morning!

**SIMONE**

Just go. Go before the woods flood so you can be with your bimbo / cheerleader pals.

**BRYN**

Don't call them that.

**SIMONE**

It's the truth.



**BRYN**

Oh, is that where we're at? The truth? You wanna talk about the truth?

**SIMONE**

Always. That's the difference between you and me.

**BRYN**

The *truth* is that those bimbo cheerleader pals have treated me better than you ever have.

**SIMONE**

Oh fuuuck you.

**BRYN**

They have! They don't talk down to me. They don't get jealous of me. They're not obsessed with being right all the time. They're just...They're nice!

**SIMONE**

If they're so nice, then how come they cut me outta everything? How come they didn't invite me to Heather DiBrizzi's lame-ass birthday party?

**BRYN**

They *did*.

**SIMONE**

What?

**BRYN**

*I'm* the one who didn't want you to come out. Heather even said I should text you, but I told her you were busy.

**SIMONE**

Why... Why would you do that?

**BRYN**

Cuz it's okay to do things without each other.

**SIMONE**

Since when??

**BRYN**

Since forever! I just finally had the guts to do it.

**SIMONE**

Yeah, in the most cowardly fucking way imaginable. You could've just told me!

**BRYN**

No, Simone. I couldn't.

**SIMONE**

Why?

**BRYN**

Cuz you'd act like you're acting now! You already get so passive aggressive when I hang out with anyone other than you!

**SIMONE**

Oh, *I'm* passive aggressive? Me?? Not Bryn the Incredible, Falsely Modest, Passive Aggressive Fucking *Mouse-Bitch*???

**BRYN**

Stop. Calling me. / That. *Word*.

**SIMONE**

You know what *really* pisses me off? You're always worrying about the end of the world, the end of the world. The water, the water, the water. But then when it actually gets close, you wanna be with anyone *but* me.

**BRYN**

That's not what I said!

**SIMONE**

You did! You just wanna ditch me out here and go spend the fucking apocalypse with all those short-skirted *twats* at Beef O’Brady’s! Do you realize how *lame* that is???

**BRYN**

You’re really hurting my / feelings.

**SIMONE**

No, you know what? Fuck it. Good for you. You’ve got new friends and new clothes and a whole new fucking life, so go enjoy it. See if I care. Cuz spoiler alert: I don’t! I don’t caaare. You’re just some airheaded cheerleader who doesn’t have jack shit to offer me. Or her!

**BRYN**

Oh, like you have anything to offer her, either. Gilly doesn’t need us!

**SIMONE**

Stop calling / her that!

**BRYN**

It’s what we named her!

**SIMONE**

It’s what *you* named her. I never *wanted* to name her!

**BRYN**

It was like the first thing you wanted to do! The only reason you held off is cuz you got jealous of all / *my* names!

**SIMONE**

I held off cuz I wanted something perfect!

**BRYN**

Do you hear yourself?? She's not a newborn child!

**SIMONE**

No, she's *better* than a child. She's better than you, better than me. Better than our teachers. Better than that old banana-titted, evil-eyed bitch Ms. Sutter. Better than my mom. But you don't give a shit about her and you don't give a shit about me, so you don't get to call her that name. Or *any* name. I don't give a fuck if you came up with it or I came up with it or the dick-licking *pope* came up with it. You don't wanna stay with her, so you don't get to say her name!

**BRYN**

What happened to you? You were way nicer when you thought she was dying. But as soon as she got her gills—which, by the way, is *great* news given our current situation—you go / right back to treating your best friend like garbage.

**SIMONE** (*plugging her ears*)

Lalalalalalala, I don't caaaaaare!

**BRYN**

Of course you don't. Cuz you don't care about anything or anyone, right? But that's a lie. Cuz you do care. You care so much. That's why you're so horrible to people. Cuz you'd rather be awful and jealous and mean than show that you care about the entire *planet*.

**SIMONE**

You take that back!

**BRYN**

You care and you *worry*. You care and you worry so much, it's *sad*.

*Creature groans.*

**SIMONE**

You're upsetting her!

**BRYN**

She always does that!

**SIMONE**

No, she's fucking sad and pissed and she hates you! I can tell cuz I know her way better than you!

**BRYN**

You're right. In fact, I know so little about her that I just forgot her name. What was it again? Oh, right. *GILLY!*

**SIMONE**

Stop it, Bryn!

*Creature groans—louder this time.*

**BRYN**

*Gilly. Gill. / Lee.*

**SIMONE**

Don't you say her fucking / name!

**BRYN**

*Gilly!*

**SIMONE**

Aaaaaaah!

**BRYN**

Gillygillygillygillygillygillygillygillygillygilly, you fucking *BITCH*, it's / Gilly!

**SIMONE**

AHHHHH!

**BRYN**

*GILLY!*

*Creature ROARS, louder than ever before. Even in the midst of their argument, the girls are both taken aback by the sound. Creature breathes and stares at them.*

**SIMONE**

You think I care?

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

You think I worry?

*Creature breathes.*



**SIMONE**

Sure. Fine. Yes yes yes, I fucking worry. I worry a lot, Bryn. People don't know that about me. I mean, I guess you do. I didn't think you did, but you've probably known for a while. And that makes me so fucking sad. What's going on inside me. Like, if I was to start worrying out loud, it'd be like that elevator from *The Shining*, where everything just keeps pouring out and pouring out and pouring out and the camera stays on it way too long. So long that you can actually see the blood stop and level off in this pool and slush around for a while. No one wants to see that. No one wants to hear that shit.

**BRYN**

I do.

**SIMONE**

No you don't! I don't even wanna fucking hear it, so why would you?

**BRYN**

Cuz you're my friend.

**SIMONE**

You just said you need a break from me.

**BRYN**

That doesn't mean I don't care about you! That's what I'm trying to say!

**SIMONE**

What about my kids? Do you care about them?

**BRYN**

What kids??

**SIMONE**

The ones I don't have yet!

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

Do you?

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

Do you care about them?

*Creature breathes.*

**SIMONE**

Do you care about your own?

**BRYN**

I don't want kids.

*Creature stops staring at the girls and coils up.*

**SIMONE**

But what if you did? What if you always wanted em, but every time you thought about it, you picture some little girl running around in a sundress and a gas mask. Sundress, gas mask, sundress, gas mask, sundress, gas mask. Sundress and a *fucking* gas mask. I think of that every. Single. Day. I wake up and I think about it and if I don't think about it, I think about how this is the first day I haven't thought about it and then I end up thinking about it anyway and it's this fever that leads to all sorts of other shit I'd rather not think about. When we missed the June temperature deadline—the Point of No Return or whatever disaster-movie term they came up with—I was so freaked out. Like, I couldn't fucking breathe. So I tried to calm myself down by driving down Little Road and singing along to PUP. Like me and my mom used to do. But then I remembered how much gas I was wasting, so I ended up in the Taco Bell parking lot crying my fucking eyes out over how panicked and useless I felt and how I couldn't even enjoy the *one* thing that was supposed to make me feel relaxed. I tried it the next day and the next and the next and the one after that and the one after that and it was the same thing. We're a disease. I mean it, Bryn. A fucking *disease*. We literally cannot walk anywhere or do anything without making the earth a worse place. Beef chalupas and punk-rock albums and the gas and air condition we expend listening to those punk-rock albums and it's punk, so it's supposed to be pure, but it's *not*. It's consumptive and decaying and horrible, just like everything

else. And there's nothing we can do about it. Oh, we're *expected* to. Even though it's our parents and teachers and every other fat, sloppy-ass adult who could've saved the planet twenty years ago, back when it was actually fucking feasible. But no. It's somehow up to us to figure it all out. It's up to kids. We're fucking *kids*, Bryn. And yet we're expected to be activists and have a good attitude and save everything while they all get to take pills and have affairs and not smile and make stupid morbid jokes all the time about how everything's fucked. Then when we find the *one* thing that needs our help—the one thing that we actually *can* help, that we can actually *save*. And what do you know? She doesn't even need us! It's like “Whoops! Sorry! Turns out you're completely fucking useless! Incapable of helping the planet or an animal or even yourself. Congrats!”

**BRYN**

*That's why you went all feral? Cuz Gilly doesn't need us anymore?*

**SIMONE**

*Yes.*

**BRYN**

But she's evolving. That's good! If she wasn't, she'd be stuck here when the woods flood and she'd die. Is that what you want?

**SIMONE**

I'm just saying it'd be nice if she---

**BRYN**

What, slowed down her own survival instincts cuz you don't wanna lose your imaginary monster friend?

**SIMONE**

She's not imaginary!

**BRYN**

You know what I mean!

**SIMONE**

Why aren't you upset??

**BRYN**

Cuz I'm happy for her.

**SIMONE**

You used to get upset about the same things I got upset about. You used to wanna do the same things as me and do everything together and---

**BRYN**

She's an animal, Simone. She's not here for us.

**SIMONE**

You bonded with her, too! Pet her and talked to her and took care of her and fed her fish and---

**BRYN**

Maybe that was a mistake. Look, I agree with you, okay? Yes, our parents failed us. Yes, humans are parasites. But we're parasites who get to live on this planet for, like, a *very* short period of time. So I guess...I guess I don't care. I used to, but I don't anymore. And maybe that's the point. To still have fun and live our lives in the face of everything sad and horrible.

**SIMONE**

The point was to take care of her. Together. We both said those words. *Together*. I thought we could...I just thought it could be like it used to. I thought we could escape.

**BRYN**

I don't wanna escape. I wanna live with all of the things inside me—the dread, the excitement, the loneliness, the romance, the fear. Gilly's evolution makes that easier.

**SIMONE**

How??

**BRYN**

Cuz if there's hope for her, maybe there's hope for us.

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

I dunno.

*Creature breathes.*

**BRYN**

I need to stay alive so I can ask Parker Jensen to Homecoming. Are you coming or not?

*Simone just stares at her. So does the creature.*

**BRYN**

Whatever.

*She starts to leave.*

**SIMONE**

Bryn, wait!

*Bryn turns around.*

**SIMONE**

I just... Maybe you could stay with me?

*Creature lifts its head and sniffs the air. It senses something the girls don't.*

**BRYN**

No.

**SIMONE**

Please? Just a little longer?

**BRYN**

I'm not gonna die out here.

**SIMONE**

You can swim.

**BRYN**

I'd rather walk.

**SIMONE**

I'm not ready to say goodbye yet.

**BRYN**

Well I am.

*She goes to the creature and pets it.*



**BRYN**

Goodbye, Gilly.

*She breaks away from the creature.*

**BRYN**

Goodbye, Simone.

**SIMONE**

Please stay please please please stay. I'm sorry I called you a bitch and I'm sorry for whatever else and I promise I'll go to Beef O'Brady's and come to all your football games and I'll even play all the *Tekken*s with you and whatever you want just please please please don't go.

*Creature uncoils and moves toward Bryn.*

**SIMONE**

See?? She doesn't want you to go, either.

*Creature rubs up against Bryn's leg.*

**SIMONE**

She loves you.

**BRYN**

She's trying to leave.

*Creature starts to slither away.*

**SIMONE**

No, no, no, no, no.

*She runs in front of the creature, blocking its path.*

**SIMONE**

Not yet, Gilly. Not you, too.

*Creature growls.*

**BRYN**

Get outta her way, Simone.

**SIMONE**

She's just scared.

*She sprawls herself over the creature.*

**BRYN**

Simone!

**SIMONE**

It's okay, Gilly. Shhh. Shhh.

**BRYN**

Get off her!

**SIMONE**

Nothing's gonna hurt you. Shhh...

*Creature growls again and wiggles beneath Simone.*

**BRYN**

Simone, please.

**SIMONE**

Come hug her, Bryn. Hug her and I'll hug you and we'll all just hug our way outta this.

**BRYN**

You're crazy!

*Creature growls louder and thrashes.*

**SIMONE**

Shhhh...

**BRYN**

Come on, she hates it!

*More thrashing.*

**BRYN**

She's gonna hurt you! Simone!

**SIMONE**

Shhhh...She won't ever hurt me. Shhhh...

**BRYN**

*Simone!*

*A ROAR. Bryn runs to Simone and pulls her off of the creature. Creature explodes again, snapping its jaws and thrashing its body.*

*Simone tries to run back to the creature, but Bryn shoves her out of the way. Creature's tail whips through the air and slashes across Bryn's torso.*

*Bryn staggers backward. She looks down at her cheerleading uniform. It's quickly blossoming with blood.*

**BRYN**

Shit.

*She looks back at the creature, just in time to see its tail whipping through the air again and striking her in her head.*

**SIMONE**

Bryn!

*Bryn falls to the ground, bleeding and unconscious. Simone runs to her and cradles her on the ground. Creature slithers toward them, then rises up like a cobra emerging from a basket. It lords over the girls, ready to strike at any moment.*

*Before the creature can deliver its deathblow, a rippling sound from slightly off in the distance. Creature freezes. A thin layer of water trickles into the space, pooling around its body. Creature looks down at it, quickly forgetting about the girls.*

*It lowers its body back to the ground. The water continues to flow in, slowly rising over the creature's body. The water hits its gills. Expand. Contract. Simone watches the creature breathe in this new environment.*

*Creature breathes.*

*It stretches its flippers.*

*It slithers, then swims away.*

*It's gone.*

*The water keeps flowing in. It's only about ankle deep, but is getting higher, washing over the girls' legs. All of the trash and Simone's scattered belongings rise with it. She holds Bryn close.*

**SIMONE**

Bryn? Bryn? Oh please, please, please...

*Bryn groans.*

**SIMONE**

That's it. Just breathe.

*She fishes around in Bryn's backpack.*

**SIMONE**

Where's your phone??

*She keeps searching. Nothing. She throws aside the backpack and shakes Bryn.*

**SIMONE**

Bryn. *Bryn*. You have to wake up. Did you put your phone in the tree? Did you actually put your phone in the fucking tree??

*No response. Simone tries to lift Bryn to her feet, but falls in the water.*

**SIMONE**

Fuck!

*She tries again. Same result. She tries to drag Bryn out of the clearing, but still stumbles.*

*She collapses into the rushing water, defeated. She cradles Bryn again.*

**SIMONE**

They've gotta know it's happening, right? Someone's gotta find us. Right, Bryn? Bryn?

*She puts an ear to Bryn's chest. Bryn breathes. Simone listens.*

**SIMONE**

That's good. Long as you're breathing. Listen. Rise. Listen. Rise...

*She sits back up.*

**SIMONE**

How about a Kesha song? Maybe that'll help. Lemme see, lemme see...Let's...Fuck, I can't think of any. You still there? You still there, Bryn? Wait, I've got it! I've got it, I've got it, I've got it. *(singing)* "DJ, you build me up. You break me down. My heart, it pounds..." Sorry, that's the only song of hers I know. The famous one. Let's see...It's uh... *(singing)* "Tonight, I'm-a fight til we see the sunlight. Tick-tock on the clock, but the party don't stop, no." Uh... "Tick-tock on the clock. Tick-tock on the clock..." That's all I can remember.

*She puts her ear to Bryn's chest again. Bryn breathes. Simone listens.*

**SIMONE**

Listen. Rise. Listen. Rise. Tick. Tock. Listen. Tick. Tock. Rise. Tick. Tock...

*Bryn groans. Simone sits back up.*

**SIMONE**

I know. I'm sorry, Bryn. I'm so fucking sorry. I can't think of any other words. *(singing)* "Tick-tock on the clock. Tick-tock on the clock. Tick-tock."

*The water rises.*

*And rises.*



*And rises.*

**SIMONE**

It's a very old song.

*She buries her head in Bryn's shoulder and holds her tightly. The water and trash continue to rise around them. None of it shows any sign of stopping.*

*END OF PLAY.*

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